You're A Dog (I'm Your Man)

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You're A Dog (I'm Your Man)

by johnslittlespoon (quickcatton)

Summary

"You and me, Bucky," Gale reminds him quietly. John presses a little bit closer, leaning against his side, taking a breath in like he'd been holding it the whole time Gale had been gone. He repeats his own words in his head like a prayer, trying to convince himself as much as John, wanting so badly to believe it.

Sometimes, when it's just the two of them and it's quiet and his heart has calmed, he thinks he does.

(Or: The Dog–Coded Bucky Fic.)

Man's Best Friend

Chapter Notes

> 'Of course you must learn to love, to love always and love entirely and to be wounded by nothing so much as the violence of your own love.' – "How To Be A Dog" by Andrew Kane

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John Egan has been glued to Gale's side for as long as he can remember.

Gale's earliest memory of the man is in spring of 1940, his first week of flight school, freshly twenty–one and feeling miles out of his league down in southern Texas. Gale had been getting chewed out for something he hadn't done, face flushed and eyes stinging as the instructor's raised voice and wildly gesticulating hands dragged his mind to split lips and his father's whiskey breath back in Wyoming.

A string–bean with wild curls had swooped in, claiming responsibility for the slip–up, not batting an eye when he was reprimanded instead. The older boy had taken it with his chin defiantly tilted up and a fire in his eyes, and Gale envied his fearlessness.

John hadn't been the one to make the error, and he told Gale as much as soon as the instructor was out of earshot. When Gale had asked why he'd taken the blame– they were strangers, afterall– John had simply replied: "Taking one for the team. That's what friends do."

And then as students shifted around and transfers were made, they'd ended up being assigned as roommates, and John shared his very own nickname with him, and the rest was history.

Buck and Bucky, major and major, never one without the other.

So it doesn't surprise Gale much that the two of them are seen as a package deal.

What does surprise him is the morning he walks into the mess hall without John, and Brady looks at him, and then looks behind him, and then looks back at him with an eyebrow raised, and says:

"Where's your dog?"

Gale balks at that as he sets down his coffee, looking at Brady in confusion before he sits down across from him and DeMarco.

“My dog?”

DeMarco snorts, like he knows something Gale doesn’t, and Gale turns his attention to him.

“Bucky,” he says it like it’s obvious.

“My dog?” Gale repeats, even more lost.

“C’mon,” Brady says. “Even got a damn dog’s name.”

Gale blinks at him, waiting for some sort of punchline, some joke he’s missing, but Brady just goes back to his toast, wholly unbothered.

And when John waltzes in a few minutes later with entirely too much energy for a Monday morning, attributing his delayed arrival to ‘taking himself for a nice walk’, ID tags jingling as he scratches restlessly at his chest and scoots his chair closer, Gale thinks that maybe he gets it.

The thing he doesn’t get is that Brady asked where *his* dog was. Not the dog, *his* dog.

Gale sits on the tailgate of a Jeep late that afternoon and watches John, watches how he bumps and nudges and roughhouses with the others, all beaming smiles and sharp canines and barked out laughs as he enjoys a day off. And he’s starting to get the dog thing, he really is.

But he doesn’t get why Brady had to go and call John *his* dog. It gets him wondering if the others think the same thing and just haven’t mentioned it, not finding a need to with how self–evident it apparently is. As far as Gale’s concerned, John’s just as happy–go–lucky at anyone else’s side.

He’s the picture of radiancy when he’s draped over Curt’s shoulders, always grinning ear to ear. They’re so rarely apart lately, the three of them falling into an easy trio– he abruptly wonders whether Curt gets the same kinds of comments from the others.

Approaching footsteps drag him from his musing, looking up to see the cause of it jogging over, sweaty curls hanging in his eyes, cheeks

flushed from the high–energy game he and the others had been entertaining themselves with.

John's face brightens when Gale looks at him, flashing a dopey smile as he leans his elbows on the tailgate, blinking up at Gale.

"Come play ball?" He asks hopefully, running a hand through his hair.

"Ball?" Gale drawls out. John nods.

"Curt said he's gonna find some chalk, draw out a baseball diamond on the tarmac. Shirts versus skins."

Gale pretends to think about it, as if he doesn't already know that he'll say yes to anything John asks, if only to see the way his eyes light up when he agrees.

"C'mon, Buck," John leans to bump his forehead against Gale's arm. "It'll be fun."

John nearly leaps back the moment Gale sighs in faux–reluctant agreement, cheesing so hard his eyes go all squinty. Gale can almost picture an invisible tail wagging behind him as he drops his boots back down to the pavement, letting John lead the way back to the others.

They call it quits when the sun drops below the horizon and the second game comes to a close, a good half of the guys nursing skinned elbows and knees from making dives across the concrete, their earlier aversion to playing on the grass for fear of tripping over loose plane parts seeming regretful now.

John is among them, ever competitive and deadly serious about their makeshift games, bruises and road rash a small price to pay for the adrenaline rush of winning. But that doesn't mean he's quiet about it as he and Gale walk back to their shared barracks.

"Shoulda thrown together some knee pads," John grumbles. Cloth drags over the scratched up skin below his elbow when he pulls his shirt back on, the chill of the night making itself known as sweat dries on his skin.

Gale holds back a wince as faint streaks of red graze the side of his shirt, too late to warn him off before he stains it, but he's sure John

wouldn't care anyway.

"It'd heal faster if you cleaned it properly," he says instead, stopping in front of their door, pulling it open and stepping aside to let John walk past.

"You gonna patch it up for me, doc?" John asks, grinning cheekily as he passes him, walking over to his bed and dropping down onto it with a heavy exhale.

Gale knows he shouldn't entertain him, but he also knows John won't be bothered enough to do it otherwise, so he shrugs his jacket off and lays it on his own bed before grabbing the small medkit hung on the wall.

John lifts his head at the sound of the zipper, huffing out a laugh.

"I was kidding, Buck."

"I know," Gale says, getting out an alcohol wipe and some gauze. "Know you won't do a thing about it on your own, though."

"It's just a scratch," John insists, but he rolls onto his side anyway when Gale sits down next to him, propping his head up in his hand to look up at him as he opens the wipe.

He holds out his arm when Gale's ready, rolling his eyes like it's such an inconvenience, but Gale sees the way his face tenses ever so slightly at the sting of the alcohol. He's gentle as he methodically wipes away the half–dried blood and bits of gravel, and he can feel John's watchful eyes on him the whole time, his usual chatter quieted by exhaustion.

It's nice to feel like he's helping, to be able to fix something for once.

Gale gives his wrist a pat once the gauze is on, letting go of it and moving to throw out the wrappers, but he pauses when warm fingers wrap around his own wrist.

"Thanks," John says when Gale turns to look at him, and he dips his head in acknowledgement.

"Always."

John lets go of his wrist then, bringing his patched up arm to his face to get a look at it.

“You sure know how to fix me up *real* good, doc.” Gale huffs out a laugh, walking to the trash and tossing out the scraps.

“Just pray you don’t ever need to come to me for stitches.”

John sighs wistfully as Gale hangs up the medkit, batting his eyes obnoxiously when he glances over.

“No happy ending?”

Gale snorts, shaking his head. He doesn’t dignify John with a response, sitting down at the edge of his own mattress to undress, both of them getting ready for bed in comfortable silence.

Gale leans back against the wall of the pub, ginger beer in hand, watching all the men’s antics with quiet amusement. Most of them have either stolen the hands of beautiful girls, or they’re too busy throwing back shots at the bar, vying for turns with the jukebox.

He keeps an eye on John specifically, sensing before they’d even arrived that there was something boiling beneath the surface. Pub nights are an excuse for all of them to let go; things have been hard on everyone lately, with missions picking up in intensity and frequency. But John tends to let emotions build up and up and then come out with a bang when he gets enough alcohol in his system, and as the self–appointed sober friend, Gale tries to nip it in the bud when possible.

He watches John sweet talk a pretty blonde girl into joining him for a dance, ignoring the twinge in his chest at the smile he shoots at her, taking a sip of his drink. He wishes only briefly that there was alcohol in it, shaking the thought away as fast as it arrives.

John looks up at him mid–song, and Gale tilts his drink towards him in a gesture of approval, receiving a grin of his own before he drags his eyes away, glancing around the room for something else to occupy his attention, something that settles less heavy on his shoulders.

Hambone’s being held upside down by DeMarco and Brady as he tries to defy gravity and throw back a shot, and it gets an entertained smile from Gale.

But John’s booming voice has him snapping his eyes back, stomach sinking as his gaze settles on his friend chest–to–chest with another

man, blondie long forgotten as she sidesteps the brewing fight and rejoins her friends.

“Scared to hit me? C’mon.”

John’s voice carries loud as he eggs the man on, and Gale’s not sure what could have possibly gotten either of them into this state in the short time his eyes were averted, but it’s clear that regardless of the reason, John’s trying to sport a shiner and a split lip before the night is over.

“Better go call off your mutt, Buck,” one of the guys nudges him, and Gale’s spine straightens.

He slowly sets his bottle down on the table nearest him, waiting to see if he needs to interfere. John’s a grown man, he knows that, but he also doesn’t want to see him get hurt– he’s not in any state to win a fight tonight. The other soldier doesn’t appear to be wanting a scuffle either, not meeting John in his shouts, seemingly trying to placate him with calm reasoning, but John isn’t relenting.

Gale resigns himself to stepping in, walking up to John and putting a hand on his shoulder, hating the way he immediately tries to shrug him off.

“Bucky,” he says quietly, and John glances at him for half a second, irritated. “Let’s go back to base.”

“You can go back,” John snaps, trying to shake his hand off again, but Gale steadies his resolve, sliding his hand down to grab his arm instead.

“C’mon, you’re making a scene,” he says, and this gets John’s full attention, the stranger taking the chance and slipping away.

“You just wish you were dancing with someone too,” he slurs out, and Gale scoffs, knowing he’s just looking for something to pick a fight over now. He’s aware of the curious gazes that have settled upon the spectacle John is creating, and he doesn’t like it.

“John.”

“Why *aren’t* you dancing with the ladies, huh?” John presses, stepping closer. “Too busy watching me instead?”

Gale feels a flicker of alarm, dropping his hand. It’s said just on the

side of too loud, and Gale's not sure if his attempt at an amused smile plays it off well enough, but he doesn't glance around to find out.

"Leaving the dancing to you tonight, bud," he says dryly, eyes trained on John's. Something unrecognizable flashes across dark blues, a nameless affliction, thunder before lightning, and Gale knows he should snuff it out before he's even sure why. He doesn't know how to.

"You can dance with me, Major," John leans in when he says it, and Gale isn't sure whether it's intentional, or a poorly timed lack of balance. Either way, he steps back, catching the sting on John's face before he glances at his watch, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"C'mon. It's late," Gale tries again. "You'll have to walk back if I don't give you a ride."

He can tell John is trying to worm his way into another line of disagreement, wheels in his head visibly turning amidst the alcohol–fog, but he can see the moment he realizes Gale isn't going to take the bait.

"Fine," John bites out, pushing past him to head for the door, ignoring the shout from the bartender. Gale watches him to make sure he actually leaves, then steps up to the bar with an apology, slapping a few bills down to cover John's tab before following him outside.

It's barely cooler than inside, the heat of summer sneaking up, but the fresh air is welcomed after the claustrophobic tension of the stuffy bar.

He finds John sitting on the hood of the Jeep, an unlit cigarette between tensely set lips, idly swinging his legs and staring at the ground, seemingly lost in thought.

"You quitting?" Gale says when he's near enough to not have to shout, but he's already reaching into his pocket for the spare lighter he keeps on him, used to the routine of John losing or bartering his own off.

He stops in front of him, lighter in hand.

"Lost my– oh." John's eyes fall on his hand, face softening momentarily. He leans closer to Gale, pursing his lips around the cigarette to make it jut out, making no move to take the lighter from him.

Gale wordlessly lifts it to the stick's end, flicking his thumb over the wheel, feeling eyes on him as he watches the white paper recoil from the flame. He mimics its motion when he pulls away from John once the embers are stoked.

He strolls around to the side of the vehicle, unlocking it and dropping down into the driver's seat with a heavy sigh, staring at John's back as he turns the key in the ignition. The headlights illuminate his silhouette against the gravel lot, a backdrop to the smoke that coils up around his head like some ghoulish halo, almost picturesque.

The radio hums away as Gale waits patiently, arms folded against the steering wheel, watching John's cigarette burn away with each pull until he's flicking it to the ground. He catches the way his shoulders rise and fall with a sigh of his own before he pushes himself off the truck, clambering his way into the passenger seat.

Gale opens his mouth to say something; he's not sure what, he just hates how his skin itches when they're arguing, even if it's only trivial.

But John reaches for the dial on the radio, cranking it up, effectively shutting down any conversation before leaning back in his seat and turning his head to stare out the window. Gale stares at him for a second longer before shaking his head, irritated, pulling out of the lot.

They get a few minutes into the drive before his annoyance starts to melt away, never able to stay mad for long, especially when he knows half of John's mood is due to drinking. He glances over on a turn, mouth twisting at the way John's temple bumps against the window when they hit a pothole.

He turns the radio down when they reach a stop sign, and John looks over dully, movements delayed.

"You want the window down?" He asks. Usually he gets onto John about opening them at night, but it's warm enough now, and he's tired of watching him mope.

John shrugs, sulky like a child, and Gale rolls his eyes, letting go of the wheel to lean over his slumped form. He cranks the handle to roll the glass down before settling back in his seat, continuing down the long stretch of road.

It only takes another minute of pointed brooding before John's head is out the window, curls whipping about, eyes shut against the rush of air, and he stays that way until they pull back onto base.

His cheeks are still flushed red from the wind when they make it back to their barracks, John stumbling all the way, refusing to lean on Gale even after he almost becomes very well acquainted with a ditch on the side of the path.

Gale's fed up with his antics. He can handle tipsy–John, has done so more times than he can count, but he doesn't like the John who drinks past his limit and lashes out at everyone around him. He can rationalize in his head that he's hurting, and he doesn't mean to take it out on others, but it doesn't make it any easier to deal with in the moment, and he knows dealing with it doesn't end when they go to bed– it continues in the morning, when John has to come to terms with whatever damage he's done, sinking into himself with self–loathing.

But John is John. He's Bucky, he's his person, and Gale resolves to be there for him through the good and bad, the same way he knows John would for him without a second thought.

He makes it damn hard to remember that when he goes right back to pushing at Gale as soon as the door is closed, the destructive look playing behind his eyes again.

"So ashamed of me, you gotta drag me all the way back here?" He leans against the door frame as he shrugs out of his jacket.

"I'm not gonna give you the fight you're looking for, Bucky," Gale says flatly as he sits on the edge of his bed to untie his boots.

"Yeah, shut down the one I had going for me, too."

"You'll thank me tomorrow when you're not in pain every time you move."

"Woulda thanked you nicer had you danced with me."

"Jokes or not, John, people talk," Gale looks up at him, growing serious.

"Wasn't joking." John's at that uncomfortably honest point of intoxication. Gale always hates this part. He's had to get real good at sidestepping things, over the years.

"Do I embarrass you?" John plows on in the absence of a response, and Gale's heart twists. *Anything but.*

“Course not,” he says firmly. “Just don’t want the guys starting to think things.”

“Oh, yeah?” John moves closer, eyes shining recklessly. “What would they think?”

Gale averts his gaze when he stands, like avoiding eye contact with a dog with bared teeth and bristling fur, not wanting to egg anything on. He picks up his boots, moving carefully past John to set them by the door.

He knows John’s just looking to argue, and he wants to avoid that; they don’t need to end the night flinging hurtful words at each other. But he also knows ignoring him won’t blow over well, not when he’s like this, keyed up and itching for some sort of stimulation.

“You know what they’d think,” he says evenly, turning and holding back a flinch of surprise when John is closer than expected.

“Would that be so fucking bad?”

It’s obvious John’s just saying things now, not much thought behind his words, because they’re both fully aware how bad that would be. They’ve seen firsthand what a blue ticket does to someone, and they've heard enough stories.

But Gale can see the hurt in his eyes, the lucidity of daytime not there to aid in masking it. Even if it was, John’s never been anything but an open book, at least to Gale. He wears his heart on his sleeve and his emotions on a flashing neon sign above his head.

“Bucky,” Gale looks at him imploringly, watching John’s eyes flick between both of his, then his mouth, then back up again. And he knows before it happens, knows what John is going to do, but he feels like his feet have grown roots and fixed themselves firmly to the floor.

John closes the distance between them with a staggering step, and Gale can smell tobacco and whiskey on his breath when he leans in, his own eyes open wide as John’s flutter closed.

Warm lips press against his and John’s mustache brushes below his nose and stubble grazes his chin and it should feel terrible and wrong and repulsive, but it doesn’t.

Somehow that’s worse.

John's hand just barely settles with uncharacteristic softness on his jaw before Gale gently pushes him away, keeping his eyes kind, resting his hand on his arm for a beat longer than necessary before he drops it.

His heart thumps in his chest when John opens his eyes, hurt and confusion and frustration painted clear on his face as he stares at Gale, disoriented.

"'s that so bad?" John's face twists, voice hoarse, and Gale suddenly sees a younger version of the Bucky he knows standing before him, insecure and lost. If he were to squint, he could almost see unruly curls falling over a youthful face, blue eyes not yet dulled, all long limbs and a god awful slouch and a spattering of freckles.

"Am I– am *I* bad?"

Gale wants to cry. He nearly does.

"No," he says firmly, more sure of that than anything else. "No, John."

"Really?" John says, and the anger is back, but it's so plainly directed inward, even if he wants Gale to think it's not. "Because you look like you've just seen someone die."

He wants to say that he has– a lot, wants to indulge John and argue in meaningless circles until he drags him out of whatever mess is going on inside his head. But there are no winners in a fight like that, and it's not supposed to be them versus each other.

"You're drunk," he says instead. "We can talk about this tomorrow, if you want."

He knows John won't, but it's not an empty offer.

"Buck, I'm–"

"Go to bed, John." Gale says it softly, but with finality, stepping away to return to his bed. He doesn't look at John as he undresses, but he can feel the way he hovers momentarily before resigning to his own bed, going through the motions in silence.

John doesn't return his murmured "goodnight" when he settles down under the blankets, and he hopes that means he passed right out as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Gale wishes he was drunk enough to crash too, or at least drunk enough for his finger to not be tracing his lips in the dark.

It takes a long time for him to get tired, and he feels like he's just barely beginning to fall asleep when the mattress dips behind him.

He tenses slightly, ready to tell John off, but he hesitates, not keen on adding to the hurt by rejecting him twice in one night.

Warmth presses up against his back, and an arm drapes itself carefully over his middle.

"I'm sorry." It's slurred out and tired, but it's sincere. John sounds like he's been crying, and Gale feels sick at the thought.

"Buck." John nudges his forehead against his shoulder when he takes too long to reply, and Gale hums sleepily to confirm he's heard, not trusting his voice to hide the tightness of his throat. He feels John nod behind him.

"Just wanted you to know," he mumbles, searching, always searching.

"I know. It's okay." Gale says. He doesn't know how to give him what he's reaching for.

But he feels John sigh in relief like he's been absolved of something, relaxing and curling up against him. Any other night Gale would coax him back to his own bed, but his heart is exhausted, and selfishly, the feeling of John's body against his makes the guilt a little less heavy.

Gale hopes John remembers none of it in the morning. He hopes he doesn't remember either.

Chapter End Notes

Heyyy lol <3

I don't even know what to say about this honestly– this fic has been in the works for over a month at this point, but it's been knocking around in my skull since the "Alright, Meatball" scene in P2. The moment I set eyes on our reckless messy Bucky, I was locked in on the dog metaphors and dog coded stuff lmaoo.

This was originally meant to be a oneshot, and then I was like okay, maybe just a two–parter, but I'm in so deep and I adore these boys so much, I figured that maybe this would be a good

chance for me to try my hand at my first chaptered fic in half a decade. Updates will be slow, I can almost guarantee that lol, but I'll be posting about my progress on my tumblr (amongst other fun brainrot) if you wanna come hang out. :-)

I'm planning on keeping this mostly canon compliant, aside from a few minor plot points, and I have so many plans for things I'd like to include, as well as a John POV/a few other add–ons when it's done, so hopefully this'll be a fun ride! I'm definitely not trying to rush and get updates out fast because I really want to do the way I see them in my head justice, and I want to make this something I'm proud of and happy with, but I hope I can make the wait worthwhile.

Anddd thank you SO so fucking much to everyone who's been so kind and patient and supportive over on tumblr while I've been agonizing over this!! It's been so fun getting to yap about it and drabble and brainrot in the process of actually writing it, and it's so motivating and exciting to know other people are invested in this trope as well <33 And thank you to my favourite human ever curtsbigspoon for betaing and letting me vent my heart out and yell about this every day, could not have even gotten started on this without you, so so much love. :'))) <3

I think that's everything lol, I'm honestly terrified to post this and to commit to starting this fic but it has my heart and soul and I'm already so attached to it so there's not much else to do but set it free into the world and see where it goes! Thank you as always for reading, it means more than you'll ever know, and I hope to see you in the next update. Mwah <3

I Bet On Losing Dogs

Chapter Summary

> Gale glances over, eyes settling on the dusting of freckles that have appeared over the bridge of John's nose from all the time spent in the late summer sun. It takes him back to their first summer at flight school, his chest fuzzy with nostalgia, and he has to fight the urge to trace his finger over the newly emerged dots, holding the newspaper tighter instead.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John is quieter the next day. He's up and out of their barracks before Gale even peels his eyes open, a feat he never fails to be impressed by, especially with the added encumbrance of what he's sure is a raging hangover.

There's a John–shaped indent on top of the blanket when Gale rolls over, and it's still warm when he presses his palm into it.

They eat breakfast as normal, chattering quietly, but John is more subdued than usual. The previous night isn't brought up, and Gale has no idea what John remembers; he wonders if he's thinking about it half as much as Gale is.

John sees him off to the tarmac as always, lost in thought behind the wheel as he drives him to his plane, where Gale's accompanying a few newbies on a drill. Nothing too serious, but there's never a non–zero chance of things going bad thousands of feet in the sky, and it's evident that thought is on John's mind when he wordlessly presses his lucky deuce into Gale's hand as he gets out of the car.

Gale nods at him, gives him an easy "see you at lunch", gets a "you better" and a smile in return, and then he's all business as he turns his attention to the new recruits.

Checks are done before they're speeding down the runway, wheels going up, and he can imagine John getting smaller and smaller until he and the car are just a dark blip on the ground. When clouds obscure his vision, he falls into the swing of things, alert and focussed, everything below falling to the back of his mind, just how he needs it to be right now.

They're gone longer than expected, an extra hour tacked on to the expected four, but things go off without a hitch; the new recruits are good, eager to learn. Naive and fresh, but Gale knows, in a way that sits heavily on his chest, that it won't take long for the excitement to dull. Watching friends drop like flies tends to do that to a man.

The airfield comes back into view a little after midday, the hustle of the mechanics visible as they approach the landing strip. Gale still holds his breath at wheels down, a nervous habit, feeling the weight of the chewed up paper in his pocket like it's anchoring him to the ground before they've even landed, an invisible line reeling him back to its owner.

And when they do land, he has to squint in the sun to make out what he realizes is the Jeep at the edge of the runway, still in the same place as it was that morning. He drops down from the hatch, and he can see John's got his flask out, the metal glinting in the sunlight as he spins it idly in his hands. He sits with his legs hanging off the tailgate, a pile of burnt–through cigarettes littering the ground beneath the shadow of his boots.

"This is how you spend your day off?" Gale teases once he's close enough. His chest feels tight.

"You're late," John ignores his dig. He sniffs as if to cover his concern, swiping his hand beneath his nose, his nervous tell.

Gale throws his bag in the trunk behind John before he pushes himself up to sit next to him, watching the new recruits make their way back down the tarmac, their eyes alight with post–flight exhilaration.

"I'll let the wind know you're waiting on me next time." He bumps his knee against John's, watching the tension in his shoulders lessen just slightly.

He knows what John means, knows they all feel it when they're sitting up in that watchtower waiting for the first glimpse of their friends returning home safe, and the minutes tick by and it gets harder to convince themselves that they're just running a little late. It's hard not to expect the worst even in hoping for the best, because whether in the sky or on the ground, every single one of them has seen how quickly things can go south.

But it's too heavy to say that, too heavy to tell him, *"I know, I'm sorry, I missed you too, I'm okay."*

“You and me, Bucky,” he reminds him quietly instead. John presses a little bit closer, leaning against his side, takes a breath in like he’d been holding it the whole time Gale had been gone. Gale repeats his own words in his head like a prayer, trying to convince himself as much as John, wanting so badly to believe it.

Sometimes, when it’s just the two of them and it’s quiet and his heart has calmed, he thinks he does.

Gale can’t keep John safely on the ground with his attempt at a demotion for long before he’s sneaking his way back into the cockpit. He’s never even *heard* of the role of reserve command pilot, and judging by the way John sinks down into his seat in the briefing room as soon as he feels Gale’s eyes on him, he’s pretty sure it’s because it doesn’t actually exist.

He won’t look him in the eyes either when Gale calls him on his weaselly behaviour, playing dumb and evading his questions, slinking out of the room like he’s got his tail between his legs to escape the scolding that sits at the tip of Gale’s tongue.

He can’t blame John, really. As terrifying as every moment up there is, it’s torture all the same to be pinned to the ground by gravity, nothing to do but pace around and kill time while you wait to find out how many friends you’ll be mourning as you crawl into bed later that night. He knows he’d do whatever he could to be in a ship at wheels up too, but that doesn’t mean he likes that John is coming along on this mission.

Africa isn’t somewhere he ever thought he’d have the chance to see, and definitely not under these circumstances. The anxiety and dread for the long and perilous flight is palpable in the thick fog that stays stubbornly in place over the airfield, only heightening everyone’s nerves as they wait.

John tries to give Gale his lucky deuce while they’re sitting around, but he shakes his head at him, elbows on his knees and chin in his hands. He tries to forcefully shove it in Gale’s pocket, and that gets him to turn and look at him admonishingly.

“I don’t need luck,” he says. He doesn’t tell him he doesn’t believe in it– he thinks maybe he does when it comes to John, at least a little bit.

John exhales heavily, like he’s deeply inconvenienced him with his

refusal, and it almost gets a smile out of Gale.

Curt finds them both not long after, sitting down at John's other side and fidgeting restlessly with the straps of his pack. Gale watches John hold the chewed–up bill out in front of Curt, insisting he take it if Gale won't, but Curt declines.

"You'll need it more than me," he says with a playful shove to John's shoulder.

"Like hell I will," John smacks the paper against Curt's cheek. "I'm flying a made–up position."

"I knew it," Gale huffs out a laugh, though it doesn't seem all that funny, John risking his neck needlessly. Curt bats John's hand away when he keeps waving the bill in front of his face.

"You two are the worst," John grumbles, shoving it begrudgingly back in his own pocket and plopping his cheek in his hand, staring out over the eerie mist.

"Ah, Johnny," Curt squishes John's face between his thumb and fingers. "You love us."

"'Course I do," John throws an arm over Curt's shoulders. "Still the worst."

John doesn't bite a corner off his lucky deuce this time.

Gale reminds him, sitting in the sand and looking up at John as he paces, but he's not sure he even hears him. His eyes are tethered to the horizon, cheeks already sporting a burn from heat none of them are used to, sweat plastering his curls to his temples.

It's exhausting just watching him. Gale's bone–tired from the long flight, limbs feeling closer to blocks of cinder than extensions of himself; he doesn't know how John's still on his feet.

"Hey," he murmurs. The last sliver of sun is about to dip below the endless shrub–dotted plains, and he can see John's hands shaking with fatigue.

"John," he says, louder, and it pulls John out of his head, glancing over his shoulder at Gale with a pained expression. Gale's heart aches.

“C’mere,” he pats the sand next to him.

“Gale.” John looks away, anguished.

“Please,” Gale softens his voice, not above begging if he has to. “Just sit, for a little bit at least.”

He watches John consider it, and then his boots are dragging through the dust towards him. He lowers himself down next to Gale, knees bent so he can fold his arms over them, leaning his cheek on the crook of his elbow with his eyes still trained on the sky.

Gale shuffles himself closer, placing a hand between John’s shoulder blades, feeling him melt into his side. He rubs his hand up and down his back in what he hopes is a soothing motion, blinking back his own tears as he stares out at the dimming skyline too.

John straightens his back after a minute, scooting as close as he can get, pressed thigh to thigh and arm to arm, and leans his head down against Gale’s shoulder, tentative, like he thinks he’s gonna shrug him off. Gale slides his hand up his spine instead, palm pressing reassuringly to the back of his neck, allowing his fingers to slip into the shorter hairs there.

He can see John’s eyelashes flutter shut out of the corner of his eye, can feel the heat of each shaky breath fan out over his shoulder, and Gale’s eyes sting. He bites the inside of his cheek as his vision blurs, the first stars in the wide open sky glinting like they’re waving at the two of them.

Gale might not believe in something bigger than himself, but he can’t help but send out a little plea into the universe, hoping that maybe if he wishes hard enough, one of the specks will draw nearer, morphing into the red of signal lights on an aircraft’s tail.

He needs this. Bring our boy home. Let him be safe.

But the constellations do not move. The night stays silent.

They don’t hear from Curt the next day, or when they make it back home. They find out they won’t hear from him ever again.

John is hit the hardest by the news. Gale doesn’t fully know what Curt meant to John, and he isn’t sure he ever really will. He doesn’t feel

like it's his place to ask, and regardless, John is different after Algeria.

They all are, none of them unaffected by how many faces are missing when they return to England, but John is quieter than he's ever been, and Gale is gentle with him, recognizing that there are things he doesn't know. He misses Curt too, aches with the empty space he's left behind in their trio, aches for all of the friends he won't see again, but it's like a piece of John died with Curt.

Sometimes he worries that if it weren't for him coaxing John back to their barracks every evening, he'd sit out on the wing of a plane all night, like a loyal dog waiting at the front door for his man to come home, unmoving until his bones locked into place.

He's drunk almost every time Gale clambers up through the cockpit to sit quietly with him that first week back, but he doesn't mention it, hiding the way his nose wrinkles at the smell of whiskey, or vodka, or rum, whatever his vice of choice is each night. He doesn't press him to talk, doesn't ask him questions or badger him about his drinking. He knows what John would say, anyway: "I get things done just fine, don't I?"

So Gale just makes sure he doesn't feel alone, and he makes sure he gets back to their barracks in one piece before the sun comes up, even at the loss of his own sleep. He doesn't mind, not really; he knows John would do the same for him.

Gale's pretty certain though that the only thing that could ever get him in a state like this would be losing John. He hopes he never has to find out.

John is introduced to Meatball towards the end of summer.

Gale goes to DeMarco after a couple weeks of watching John sink further and further into himself, feeling hopeless and trying to cope with his own grief over all the loss at the same time, and they come to the conclusion that maybe some puppy love will cheer everyone up.

They couldn't have been more wrong.

"What kinda name is Meatball?" Is the first thing John says when DeMarco presents him with the big white dog.

Gale had lured him over to the field with the promise of a surprise,

satisfied at the flicker of life he'd seen behind John's eyes when he'd lifted his head from his pillow at Gale's words. He considers anything that drags him from their barracks on a day off as a win lately.

DeMarco lets go of Meatball's leash, and the dog beelines for Gale, all prancing legs and wriggling body, sweeping tail thumping against John's leg as Gale crouches down to greet him.

He glances up at John while he pets Meatball and has to hold back a laugh at the look of mild offense on his face, feeling a wet nose against his cheek.

"Say hi," Gale encourages, and John sighs like it's *such* a hindrance, squatting next to him and holding a hand out towards the dog. Meatball sniffs at it for half a second before going back to nosing at Gale, and DeMarco snorts.

"I just ate jerky too, and he didn't even notice," John huffs. "About dumb as his name."

"Hey," DeMarco shoves his shoulder defensively, almost unbalancing him. "I chose it."

"Out of every food?" John looks up at him incredulously, squinting in the sun.

"Play nice, Bucky," Gale chides, and John's attention snaps to him without missing a beat, his expression softening ever so slightly.

John leans close to run a hand through fluffy white fur, and Meatball chooses that moment to dart back to DeMarco, sniffing at his pocket for treats. Gale stands with a sigh, disappointed at the rough first impression.

"He hates me," John sulks, letting himself tip back onto his ass, leaning his wrists on his knees. Gale mindlessly slips a hand into his dark curls, ruffling them apologetically.

"You're new, that's all," he insists. "He knows me and Benny, he's just gotta get used to you."

He looks down to give John a smile, and finds him already blinking up at him, eyebrows no longer furrowed.

Meatball trots back over, and Gale moves his hand from John's hair to pet him, shaking his head at the glare John shoots the dog.

Regardless of John's opinion of Meatball, having a dog around gets all of the boys feeling a little more adventurous as summer draws to a close, spending days off exploring the surrounding countryside with their four–legged recruit instead of holing up in their barracks, or going out to town to day–drink.

It gives them a sense of normalcy, removing themselves from the rigidity of their usual environment, allowing them to escape the weight of their day–to–day to pretend they're just a group of friends enjoying a carefree summer afternoon.

Today, a bunch of them have ended up at a lake Ken and Brady had stumbled across on one of their excursions, packing a couple trucks up with food and towels and rallying together anyone who isn't too busy or too exhausted to join in on their little day trip.

It's a peaceful area, far enough from the main road that the only sounds Gale can hear as he lounges on his towel are the birds and occasional plane overhead, and the hollering and laughter of the guys. Half of the lake is surrounded by the warm sand they've all laid their towels and blankets out on, and the far end is bordered by some rocky outcroppings, which Gale is certain are going to have him pulling his hair out with stress by the end of the day once their diving potential is realized by the others.

John stretches on his towel next to him, then pushes himself up onto his knees, leaning over Gale expectantly. Gale drags his eyes away from his newspaper, using it to shield his eyes from the sun as he looks up at him, waiting.

"Come swim?" John asks, tilting his head.

"In a bit," Gale assures him, turning back to the paper.

"You said that ten minutes ago," John complains. Gale cracks a smile, not lifting his eyes.

"I said, 'Let me warm up for a bit first,'" he corrects him. "I'm sure you're capable of swimming on your own."

The impatience is endearing, if anything, but Gale's more of a nice and dry on the beach kind of guy, enjoying the relaxation of a day by the water over the actual swimming. John is very much the opposite.

“‘Course I am,” John grumbles, though he makes no move to stand up, instead sprawling back out with his face to the sky, eyes closed.

Gale glances over, eyes settling on the dusting of freckles that have appeared over the bridge of John’s nose from all the time spent in the late summer sun. It takes him back to their first summer at flight school, his chest fuzzy with nostalgia, and he has to fight the urge to trace his finger over the newly emerged dots, holding the newspaper tighter instead.

John purses his lips to blow a loose curl off his forehead, raising his arms to fold them beneath his head, inhaling deeply like he can force relaxation into himself while he waits. The corner of Gale’s mouth quirks up, and he turns his attention back to his reading, warmer than he was a minute ago.

He gets a few pages in before John’s eyes snap open and he abruptly sits up, leaning over Gale again.

“Alright, gramps, time to swim,” John says decidedly, reaching for his newspaper. Gale makes a noise of indignance, yanking it out of his grasp and rolling it up, swatting John lightly over the nose with it without a second thought.

John sits back on his heels with a scandalized expression, and Gale holds back a laugh, pointing the paper at him threateningly, though he can’t help the smile that plays at his lips.

“Behave,” he says firmly. John opens his mouth to argue, but Gale waves him off. “Go play. I’ll join you in a minute, I promise.”

That seems to be good enough for John. His face looks a little pink when he pushes himself to his feet, trotting his way down the bank to join the others in the water. Gale hates to cave and reward him for bad behaviour, but he’s just happy to see his friend with a bit of life in him again; he’ll do whatever he can to stoke that flame.

He unfurls the paper and finishes off the page he’s on, then tucks it into his bag, sitting up. Brady’s on John’s shoulders, and they’re locked in a game of chicken fight with Bubbles sat atop Crosby’s shoulders, water splashing every which way, raucous laughter echoing across the lake.

It makes Gale’s heart warm, watching John with the other boys, knowing that other people see how golden he is too, even if John doesn’t see it himself. But there's also this feeling in the pit of his

stomach that sneaks up on him, and he doesn't know what it is, doesn't want to analyze it, not keen on making growing–space for the tiny wisps of something akin to selfish possession that curl around his middle.

Brady and Bubbles go tumbling down at the same time, John and Crosby immediately bickering over who hit the water first, Hambone diplomatically insisting that it's a tie, breaking up the good–natured competition.

Gale stands when he sees John's gaze fall on the rocks at the far end, keen on avoiding any concussions today, and John is easily distracted from any reckless ideas he might've been getting when he reaches the edge of the sand, eyes bright as he surges through the water towards Gale.

"C'mon, we can win a round," John grabs his wrist and drags him into the lake, Gale cursing at the way cool water splashes over his hot skin.

John's clambering onto his back as soon as he's waist deep, not waiting for him to lower himself to make it easier, clinging to him as Gale wades deeper.

"Alright, alright," he relents, bending his knees and offering his palms for John to press his own into as he gets his legs situated on his shoulders. He wraps his hands securely around John's calves, a buzz running up his forearms, feeling fingers lightly settle in his hair when he stands back up.

DeMarco tosses his sunglasses onto the shore and offers himself up, crouching so Hambone can get himself up on his shoulders, already jeering to egg the two of them on. John's thighs tense at the sides of his head when someone counts them down, pressing against his ears, slightly muffling the sounds of the water sloshing up around them when both he and DeMarco lunge forward.

John and Hambone grab at each other's arms in a fight to unbalance the other as soon as they're within range, and Gale's pretty sure he can hear playful growls from above him, breathing out a laugh as he digs his heels into the sandy floor, trying to work with John's movements to predict which way he'll need to be stabilized.

Water rolls down his back from the sopping wet fabric of John's shorts, and he can feel John's muscles tensing against his jaw and beneath his hands, and maybe it's just the physical exertion of keeping the broad man in place, but it makes him feel a bit loopy, face warm

from more than just the sun.

He ducks his head when John leans forward, giving Hambone a good shove, almost pitching Gale over in the process, but Gale adjusts his grip so he's got one arm wrapped around John's right thigh, giving him some extra stability to really go for it the next time Hambone grabs at him.

The other pair put up a good fight, but John's as relentless in competition as he is with anything else he throws himself into, and soon he's whooping victoriously as he manages to push Hambone hard enough for DeMarco to lose his footing, both of them tipping over into the water.

"It's the big leagues, boys!" John crows, curling down over his head to grab his wrists, raising them in the air triumphantly.

This starts up more commotion with others vying for a shot at dethroning the two of them, and who is Gale to deny John this when he looks more alive than he has in weeks?

They duke it out a few more times, alternating positions until Gale's exhausted enough that a single solid shove topples him from John's shoulders, back hitting the water, Crosby shouting about being the new reigning champion.

John still beams at him when he stands back up, pushing wet hair out of his face.

"We had a good run," he consoles, and Gale smiles, nodding and clapping John on the back.

"And I'm gonna have a good rest," he tells him, shaking his head with a laugh at John's complaints, already wading up to the shore where some of the others are draped over their towels before he can get roped into another round. He drops down onto his own towel, stretching out on his back, letting the sun dry him off as he listens to the cheery laughter and splashes of his friends.

Gale almost dozes off in the warmth until the light through his eyelids grows shadowed, and he blinks them open to see John approaching, dripping water as he goes. He narrows his eyes at the impish smile that spreads across John's face, one he knows all too well.

"Egan," he says in warning, but all he gets in return is a bark of a laugh and a plea (that sounds a lot more like a threat) to "come back

in, Buck."

The "not yet" barely leaves his mouth before John's shaking his hair out above him, water droplets flying every which way, spattering cold across his sun–heated skin.

"John," he hisses at the shock to his system, reaching out to smack the back of his hand over his knee in retaliation.

"Gonna come back in?" John dodges a second hit, grinning down at Gale, still dripping water onto him. "We need an even number for ball."

"Feels like you brought the whole lake with you," Gale swats at his ankle in an attempt to shoo him off, but instead, John drops to his hands and knees next to his towel with a huff.

Gale doesn't have time to roll out of the way before John tackles him, throwing a leg over one of his own and flattening himself along the length of his body as Gale inhales sharply at the press of cold wet skin, immediately shoving at John's shoulders.

John only laughs, pushing at his wrists and shaking his hair out onto him again, and Gale fights back with a renewed determination to escape the soaking wet shorts pressed to his thigh, hooking his leg over the back of John's and throwing his full weight into a roll, flipping them over onto the sand.

He grits his teeth when hips buck up beneath him in an effort to throw him off, as if John needs to tell him twice in his haste to detach himself from his wet body, bracing his knees on either side of John and leaning his hands on his broad shoulders to push himself off, but fingers close around his forearm before he can do so.

And then teeth close around the bone of his wrist, and Gale lets out a noise of surprise, palm slipping over damp skin, eyes snapping up to John's face, his shit–eating grin evident even where his canines lightly dig into his skin.

"Damn dog," Gale yanks his wrist away, tumbling onto his back in the sand with the force of his pull, sitting up in preparation to scramble away from another advance, but John stays on his back where he's cackling to himself, sand sticking to his skin.

Gale's eyes fall to his wrist, running his thumb over the teeth–shaped indents on his skin, snorting in disbelief.

“Jesus, Bucky,” he lifts his eyes back up. “Gotta resort to chewing on me to win your battles?”

John’s head rolls to the side to look at him, still smiling.

“Only a love–bite, Buck,” he waves him off, pushing himself to his feet, nodding in the direction of the lake. “Better get goin’, or I’ll show you a real one.”

There’s no real threat, only a gleeful shine to his eyes, but Gale relents, accepting the hand John extends to help him to his feet.

“I’m goin’,” Gale insists when John pretends to lean towards his shoulder for another nip, dodging the exaggerated snap of his teeth, shaking his head at the others’ cheers of triumph when he wades into the water.

When Gale goes looking for John at his usual spot on the plane wing that evening, he’s surprised when he passes by the cockpit and sees a bushy white tail wagging between the two seats there. He makes his way to the doorway, poking his head through to find John sitting in the seat to the right, his hand thoughtlessly stroking Meatball’s ear as he stares out the window, seemingly lost somewhere in the acres of grass and tarmac.

“Wow,” Gale rumbles out, and John’s head snaps over, coming back to himself. “Look at my boys, getting along. Who woulda thought?”

John drops his hand from Meatball’s ear with a roll of his eyes, and the dog pushes at his knee, not happy about this turn of events. Gale can’t help but smile at his obvious show of attitude, crouching to ruffle Meatball’s fur and scrunching his nose up at the messy lick he receives to his cheek in return, deciding he can give John a reason to sulk, if he wants it.

“Hey, buddy,” he says to Meatball. “How’s my favourite boy?”

John shifts ever so slightly in his seat, sighing a little, and Gale presses his lips together to hold back a laugh. Jealous of a dang dog. It makes his heart swell in his chest, just a little bit.

He stands then, leaning against John’s seat to follow his gaze out the window, the last sliver of sun at the curve of the earth bathing them both in an orange glow. He settles his wrist on John’s shoulder, fingers

idly tugging at the shorter hairs that curl at the base of his neck, wondering what's going on in his head, if there's something out there only he sees.

"Don't you worry," he murmurs. "Y'know you're my favourite, Johnny."

He hears John's breath catch in his throat, sees him go tense for a moment before he eases up.

"You okay?" Gale's hand stops its motions, eyes searching the side of John's face.

"Yeah," John says, and at first he thinks that's all he's gonna get. But he feels his shoulder rise and fall beneath his arm as he takes a breath, exhaling heavily like he's unburdening himself.

"Yeah, just, that's uh– 's what Curt used to call me."

"Oh," Gale breathes out. *Oh.* "I'm sorry, John."

John tilts his head to the side to look up at him as soon as he apologizes, eyes soft with nostalgia.

"No, I don't mind, it's… it's nice to hear it again, actually."

Gale knows the smile he gets all too well, the kind that doesn't quite reach his eyes, is sure the one he gives John in return doesn't look much different, but there's understanding in the shared ache. His hand returns to its place in his hair when John's gaze returns to the horizon, scratching at the back of his head in what he hopes is a comforting manner, nodding to himself.

I'll take care of your boy, Curt, he sends the thought out into the orange dusk.

Always.

Chapter End Notes

> My angels… my loves… I am so sorry for this one. I really wrestled with deciding whether to divert from canon when it came to our boy or not, but I ended up not doing so since I've been following canon as close as possible with everything else, and because as sad as it is, it was an event that was really important for character development for John in the show– it'll

especially affect things in his POV of this fic (which will have lotsa CurtBucky, rest assured) when I write it.

BUT on the brightside, I am hoping to write a spin–off set in this universe as an exploration of ‘what if Curt didn’t die’, aka an excuse to write CurtBuckBucky lol, so I hope that softens the blow a little. :(

That aside, I just wanna say thank you from the bottom of my heart for all of the kind comments and feedback on chapter one, oh my GOD. I think you're just trying to make me cry at this point, I can't fathom the love and sweet things, I'm so so thankful and I appreciate it endlessly. ♡ I have so many comments to get back to still, I feel so bad that I take so long but please know I reread them every time I need motivation to work on this and I wish I could give everyone the biggest hug :')))

Thank you again to my bestie curtsbigspoon for listening to me yap as I write and for beta–ing as always, I owe you my life bbg <33

And as usual, I'm over on my tumblr posting updates for this fic, brainrotting to hell and back, answering drabble asks, etc etc, the whole spiel. Thank you again for reading my little heart–project, it means everything to me and I hope this one was everything you'd hoped for. :^)

When I Call, You Come Home (A Bird In Your Teeth)

Chapter Summary

> John doesn't belong to him, or anyone. Not when 'Buck and Bucky' are always spoken one after the other, not when they're sitting in the corner of a pub watching the others court pretty girls, pretending their thighs aren't pressed a little too close, not when they're crammed into the cockpit of a plane in the evening, watching the sun go down and talking into the late hours of night.
>
> And that's just fine with Gale.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gale thinks that maybe he's starting to understand who Curt was, to John. The waters are still muddy, and John is vague, but he sorta feels like his admission on the plane was a test, and Gale must have passed it, because John opens up a little bit more over the next few weeks.

It's usually just a small comment here and there, a quiet "one time Curt and I…" or "Curt used to say…", accompanied by an expression of longing so visceral and so aching that it hurts Gale to look at.

But he always listens, and makes sure to give John his full attention, sharing his own memories of the boy in an effort to comfort.

Because Gale doesn't feel like he's good at comfort. Some nights he can hear sniffling coming from the other bed when John thinks he's asleep, and his heart shatters, but he doesn't know how to help, or how to fix things.

He knows what John would do; he knows John would climb right into his bed behind him and pester him until he talked, and he'd know exactly what to say, how to make him laugh after. That's just how John is, and it's something he loves about him. He wishes he was better at that kind of thing.

He does try, one night. He calls John's name into the darkness, but John immediately falls silent, and Gale wants to take that as a cue to

drop it, but it hurts his heart to think of him laying there alone trying to stifle his cries, so he sucks it up and drags himself to his feet.

He quietly pads over to John's bed, hesitantly sitting down on the edge of his mattress, staring at the unmoving slope of his shoulders before he gently settles his palm on one of them, hearing John suck in a breath.

"Hey," he murmurs, running his thumb along the collar of his sleep–shirt, trying to find the right words. He wants to ask if he's okay, but he knows that's stupid; obviously he's not. None of them are, much less so John.

"You wanna talk about it?" He asks instead, stealing a page out of John's book. He shrugs under his hand, and Gale nods to himself, almost squirming with the feeling of being so out of his comfort zone and area of expertise.

"It's okay if you don't want to," he says softly. "But I'm here, if you do, or if you need anything. Only a few feet away, John."

John nods, and the blanket shifts as a hand slips from beneath it to rest over Gale's own, squeezing gently in silent thanks before it retreats back into the warmth, and Gale thinks it's as good as a response as he's gonna get, so he gives John's shoulder a squeeze in return before heading back to his own bed.

John doesn't take him up on it that night, or any other night, but Gale feels better with the offer out there, and he hopes John does too, knowing he has the option. He *is* fairly certain he feels the mattress dip as weight leaves the bed behind him one morning just before he fully wakes up, but John doesn't bring it up, so neither does he.

All Gale can do is keep him busy, spending as much time with him as possible, which isn't hard, considering John's even more glued to him than he usually is. He doesn't mind; he's glad to not have a lot of time to get lost in his own head either.

There's only so much to do around base when they're not flying, so Gale gets creative, inventing tasks he conveniently needs help with, or little challenges and games to keep them both occupied. He's not sure if John realizes what he's doing and is choosing not to comment on it, or if he's really none the wiser, but either way it keeps John from reaching for his flask as often, and gives Gale more time with him.

"Watch, eyes closed!" John covers his eyes with one hand, dragging

the other back before propelling his arm forward, launching the baseball in his hand straight over Gale's head. It lands in the grass with a *thump* a few yards away.

Evidently, Gale's new game of seeing how many times they can toss a ball back and forth across greater distances before one of them misses has grown old, John resorting to so–called trick shots. He uncovers his eyes and makes a face when he realizes he's overshot, scratching the back of his neck abashedly as Gale turns to retrieve the ball.

"Lemme go again, I'll get it this time," John insists when Gale returns, attention trained on the grass–stained sphere in his hand.

"Alright," Gale relents, lifting his hand over his shoulder. He snaps his arm forward, and John's head jerks back, eyes lifting only to be greeted with empty air. Confusion flickers across his face before his gaze drops back down to Gale's hand, finding the ball still snug in his grasp.

"Buck," John complains, looking deeply betrayed, and Gale snorts out a laugh.

"Aw, Bucky, y'almost looked like our good pal Meatball," he teases, though he throws it properly this time when John narrows his eyes at him, biting back a smile at the split–second of distrust before he sees Gale's actually tossed it.

John quickly shuffles his boots backwards on the grass with his eyes due north, catching it just before it sails over him.

"Okay, no eyes," John repeats, and Gale remembers the time in flight school that he'd said the same phrase while they'd been biking back to their dorm after a night out drinking, John barely able to bike straight as it were, let alone once one hand left the handlebar to cover his eyes. Gale had learned what noise a bike and its occupant make when meeting a fencepost head–on, and it was a memory that never failed to make him laugh.

Thankfully John isn't able to see and question the nostalgic smile on his face, palm over his eyes again.

"Ready?" He asks.

"Do your worst," Gale affirms. John winds his arm back, then hesitates for a second.

“Did you hear Jameson got blue ticketed last night?”

There it is.

The ball is flung forward, and this time it’s not the fault of the pitcher that Gale misses his catch, reaction delayed at the unexpected broach of the topic. He could tell something had been eating at John all day, but he knows by now that if John wants to talk about something, he will; it’s always a waiting game. Gale just hadn’t connected the dots in his head yet.

But he *had* heard. He’d been doing a lap of the grounds just before dawn, something he’s taken to doing lately when he can’t sleep, and he’d seen the man leaving one of the barracks with his briefcase in hand, head down as he climbed into the passenger seat of one of the Jeeps before being driven off base.

There had been whispers and rumours over breakfast of why he’d left, enough for Gale to piece together what had happened. He’d felt sick about it all day, and he hadn’t wanted to bring it up to John, though he wasn’t sure why.

“Good throw, my fault,” he turns to jog after the ball when John’s hand drops from his face, giving himself a second to choose his words.

“I did hear,” he says cautiously as he walks back, eyeing John warily, letting him steer.

“Do you think it’s true? Why he was discharged?” John asks, and Gale isn’t sure how to reply. He underhands the ball back when he’s close enough, and John catches it, rolling it between his palms, making no move to throw it back yet as he studies Gale. He feels like he’s being tested again, somehow, and it makes him uneasy, not being able to read John.

“I think he was a damn good gunner,” Gale says sincerely. John still watches him like a hawk as he continues. “And I think it doesn’t matter who he’s been taking to bed. He showed up and did his job like the rest of us, and it’s a shame to lose him, ‘specially over something like that.”

That seems to satisfy John, gaze dropping to the baseball as he nods at his words, tracing his thumb over the stitching. It’s quiet for a few seconds before he lifts his head again.

“Sometimes Curt and I would talk about getting ticketed, y’know,”

John clears his throat, tossing him the ball with no special flourish this time. Gale almost misses his catch anyway, heel dragging in the grass as he lunges for it, trying to school his expression into one that doesn't mimic the cold fear he feels at John's admittance.

"Staging something, I mean," John quickly corrects himself, as if the legitimacy of it is what strikes alarm in Gale's head. "Thought maybe it would be better, being sent home."

"Jesus, John." Gale feels like his heart is in John's mouth, canines sinking in every time he speaks. He's glad when John opens up to him, but it feels like it's always with little to no warning, not giving him time to prepare for the plummet to the floor that his stomach takes.

"I wish *he* had, at least. Maybe he'd still…" Gale's throw goes embarrassingly long, but John turns and trots faithfully after it without a second thought, undeterred, no distance too far.

"C'mon Buck, we're outta sync today," John shouts over his shoulder as he goes. Gale can only stare helplessly at his back, at a loss for words, feeling like he'll never get used to how poignantly sharp 'maybe's and 'what if's settle in the air.

"Don't worry," John huffs when he makes it back. "Wouldn't really have left without you, if that's what you're worryin' about."

It isn't, actually; he's thinking a lot more about how scared the two of them must've been to even consider that option, because everyone knows how blue discharges are treated when they're sent home. Good luck getting a job, buying a house, hell, walking to the shops without getting jumped, at least in their small towns. And with the near–zero chance of getting an appeal for benefits granted, there's not much good waiting at home for anyone who returns on the back of that kind of ticket.

"Don't go talking like that," he pleads gently, not sure how else to respond.

I worry about you? I can't do this without you? I need you here? I need you?

"What's it matter anyway?" John glances skyward for a beat, then back at the ball in his hand. "Too late for that."

"Then don't go thinking about doing anything that stupid," Gale

amends. “We need our Major around.”

John looks unswayed, more interested in picking at a crack in the leather.

“I need my partner in crime around too,” he tries, and he knows he’s got John when he lifts his head again. “What am I supposed to do if you leave me behind?”

John nods as he thinks, and Gale sees something resolute settle over his face, the same look he gets when Gale asks for his assistance with a task.

“Alright?” He pushes, wanting verbal confirmation for his own sanity’s sake.

“Alright,” John grumbles, feigning irritance. “So long as you start making your catches.”

Gale’s smile is one of relief.

Gale trails his finger idly over the damp condensation on the glass in his hand and tries to stop worrying.

It feels like it’s all he ever does lately, the carefree–guise of sunny days becoming few and far between as they ebb into autumn. He worries about the next mission, he worries about his friends, he worries about the other men, but most of all he worries about John. Even when he’s not worrying about him, he still seems to permeate every corner of his mind– tonight is no exception.

The pub is crowded, raucous music and voices filling the room, the clink of glasses punctuating drunken bets and challenges. There’s plenty to occupy his sober eyes as he leans against the bar and counts down the hours until it’s time to take on the role of designated driver, yet his gaze keeps finding its way back to where John sits in one of the booths, arm slung over the shoulders of a bright–eyed blond man.

Gale doesn’t recognize him; he thinks he must be from another base, maybe on some sort of leave. Either way, John and the stranger look comfortable enough to pass for being old friends, leaning in with their laughter, only moving closer as the night drags on.

There’s a bitter taste in Gale’s mouth that he can’t write off as his

ginger beer, and he has to drag his eyes away when the blond squawks out a laugh and a *"John!"* when John dips his head to whisper something in his ear.

He can't remember the last time he's heard anyone other than himself refer to John by something aside from his rank or his nickname. The green snake coiling around his chest whispers that his name belongs to *him,* not some man John's only just met, and he wants to reach down his own throat and throttle the thing, to shut it up by force if he can't quiet his mind on his own.

Because that's just senseless. John doesn't belong to him, or anyone. Not when 'Buck and Bucky' are always spoken one after the other, not when they're sitting in the corner of a pub watching the others court pretty girls, pretending their thighs aren't pressed a little too close, not when they're crammed into the cockpit of a plane in the evening, watching the sun go down and talking into the late hours of night.

John's his best friend, and as much as he feels special when he's got the lively golden boy's attention all to himself, neither of them belong to the other and that's just fine with him.

Maybe they've been spending too much time together– becoming *too* codependent. It's probably healthy that they spend time around other people, though Gale's all too aware that *he's* the one sitting alone, nursing a non–alcoholic drink, trying to convince *himself* that independence might do them both some good.

He's just not keen on directing his attention elsewhere for too long when every time his gaze returns to the duo in the booth after a minute of wandering, they've seemingly drawn impossibly nearer, like they're magnetized by some invisible force. Or the alcohol, judging by the array of empty glasses and bottles scattered around the table they share with a few other men Gale doesn't recognize.

John's always naturally touchy and easygoing, even with people he's just met; that's nothing out of the ordinary. But he's pressed so close to the blond that the only way they could possibly get closer would be by way of one of them crawling into the other's lap, and Gale chews at the inside of his cheek, torn.

It's risky, even with how accustomed to John's usual affections and antics the rest of the guys are, and especially with tensions still high after Jameson's discharge. Gale does a quick sweep of the pub with his eyes, mildly relieved when he doesn't catch any questioning looks

directed John's way, but he still feels too antsy to sit and pass time, stomach knotted with apprehension.

He hates to be a buzzkill again, but his watch confirms it's getting late, and the more people start to clear out, the less cover there is for John to hang all over the blond with an expression akin to the one he wears when he's chatting up a pretty girl. The pair don't look like they're planning on leaving anytime soon– Gale's chest tightens at the thought of what it would mean if they do leave together.

He wants to be misreading things so badly that he almost lets himself believe that he is, but as naive as he might be in some areas, he's not so foolish that he hasn't picked up on the unspoken sentiments of John's sporadic confessionals. He's sure John intended for him to, otherwise he wouldn't have continued to open up to him about things many of the other men wouldn't take half as kindly to. He wouldn't be much of a friend if he didn't know John well enough to figure this stuff out.

Gale's never had an issue with who kisses who, never able to reconcile with the notion that one person might not be deserving of giving or receiving love just because of who their love is directed towards, no matter how much his father had tried to knock the sentiment into him growing up. Regardless, it's never felt like any of his business just as much as it's not his business to judge the women his friends hang around, but he knows that's different, because with them, he doesn't have to worry about seeing them pack up their shit and leave in silence in the middle of the night to be banished to an empty life back home.

So with John, he worries, a lot. Half of him wants to ask him why he can't just choose any of the doe–eyed girls that bat their lashes at him– clearly he's got no qualms with taking women to bed, and it's the safer option. But he has a feeling that wouldn't go down all that well, so he keeps that question to himself.

He can't keep the restlessness to himself any longer though, abandoning his nearly–empty glass and smoothing out his jacket as he stands, checking his watch again to save face as he approaches the table. Warmth flickers in his chest when John's face lights up at the sight of him, leaning over the blond to nudge at his arm, crescent–moon eyes gone all squinty under the yellow bulbs.

"Buck!" He barks out. Gale has to fight back a smile at the way the stranger jumps ever so slightly, almost embarrassed at how reassured

he feels knowing he can read John like no one else can, able to see the loud exclamations and jerky movements before they even bubble out.

“You joining us?” John looks at him with so much hope, and Gale feels his resolve crumble in a breath, pushing down his agitation.

“For a bit,” he concedes, and John grins like he’s won the lottery, immediately scooting down the bench and dragging the poor stranger with him to make room. Gale slides into the booth, settling awkwardly next to the stranger, giving him a stiff nod and pulling out a toothpick to occupy himself.

John leans what seems like half his body on the table to be able to look at them both, hand never leaving the blond’s shoulders.

“Tom, this is Buck,” he gestures, and the blond offers him a smile, cheeks flushed from the alcohol (and likely John’s handsy tendencies, but Gale doesn’t feel like thinking about that). “Buck, this is my new friend Tom.”

Gale dredges up a smile the best he can, not aiming to take out his internal conflict on some poor unassuming guy.

“What do you do, Tom?” He asks, friendly enough, working the sliver of wood into the corner of his lips.

“Travelling air mechanic, sir. I’m assigned to bases when spots need to be filled.”

Something clicks in Gale’s head. A mechanic– a safe option. Someone who John doesn’t have to watch fly off into aerial minefields day after day; he can rest knowing he’s safe on the ground. He wonders if John’s cognizant of this, if it’s intentional, or if John’s just latching onto something fun and temporary and Gale’s reading too much into things in some sad attempt to quell whatever unsteady self–doubt builds in his stomach.

“Get to see a lot of the country, then?” Gale asks politely. He doesn’t hear a word of the enthusiastic response, because the hand John’s been resting on Tom’s back brushes against his shoulder, and he nearly flinches, immediately glancing past the blond.

John isn’t looking at him, busy picking up his slack and entertaining Tom’s tales of travel, but Gale feels his fingers continue to crawl up his shoulder until he rests them on the collar of his jacket, fingertips just barely ghosting over the nape of his neck. He’s not sure John’s

even aware he's doing it, looking entirely too entrenched in the conversation to notice how rigid Gale's gone.

He closes his teeth around the toothpick and tries to maintain a pleasant demeanour, hoping it's enough to get him through this interaction without having to contribute much more. John fidgets with the back of his jacket, a finger dipping below the fabric to trace along the top of his spine, and Gale feels like he's been burnt by flak, exerting actual physical effort to keep himself from leaping out of the booth and away from the source of the flames.

When he chances another look at John, he's already looking back, expression unreadable. Gale clenches his jaw as fingertips trace back up to toy with the short hairs at the base of his skull, not sure why he's feeling such an urge to flee when this is child's play in comparison to the way John usually drapes himself over him; John looks just as confused as he feels.

He finds himself missing the featherlight touch as soon as it's gone, tension not half as alleviated as he'd expected, abruptly feeling out of place. His eyes drift away to settle on the door longingly, and John promptly slides his empty glass away, clapping Tom on the shoulder.

"Better call it a night," he says to the man, lifting his eyes to address Gale. "Ready to go?"

Gale tries not to look as eager as he feels when he nods, scooting out of the booth, Tom following his lead to let John out. The man looks up at John expectantly, maybe awaiting an invite, maybe awaiting a promise to meet again next week– Gale doesn't want to stick around to find out.

"Gonna go settle my tab," he bids the rest of the group goodnight, wandering back over to the bar and putting down his bills, glancing back over at John as the bartender counts them. Tom looks mildly disappointed at whatever John's saying, and Gale's stomach twists with guilt before he returns his attention to the man at the bar, thanking him and making his way out of the pub before anyone pulls him into another conversation.

The chilly September night soothes his overheated skin, but it doesn't erase the scorched sensation on the back of his neck; if anything, it makes it stand out more. He pulls in a deep breath as he walks across the lot to the Jeep, climbing into the driver's seat and sinking down heavily.

He wishes he'd taken up smoking like the rest of the guys, just for something to occupy his hands and mind, toothpick long since splintered between his teeth and tossed out the window.

He closes his eyes, leaning his head back, drumming his hand restlessly on the wheel. He runs through flight checks in his mind, drowning out any other thoughts that try to slip their way in with repetitions of numbers and valves and switches until the passenger door swings open and he jumps, eyes snapping open.

"You fall asleep?" John teases as he settles in his seat, shutting the door behind him before he tilts his head to look at Gale.

"Not quite," he says evenly, turning away to start the truck as his heart recovers from the fright, but John catches his wrist, and Gale has no choice but to meet his eyes.

"You good?" John asks sincerely, and Gale nods.

"You sure? You seemed off."

"Just tired." Gale feels bad for making him fret, but he's not sure he can explain what's off anyway.

"Didn't look tired," John presses, but he lets go of his wrist, leaning back in his seat.

"You're just too drunk to see it," Gale shoots back lightly, though it feels unfair. John always sees him, always surprises him with how much attention he pays him even when Gale thinks he's two glasses too deep for coherency. Maybe he hasn't drank as much tonight as he usually does.

"Don't need to be sober to realize you were itchin' to get the hell outta there," John says as Gale turns the keys in the ignition, engine rumbling to life.

He can feel his eyes on the side of his face as he pulls out of the lot, carefully weighing out an adequate response, since it seems like John's not going to drop it.

"Was just worried, is all," he finally says, watching the road, glad to have a reason to avoid the piercing stare.

"About?"

“You.” He knows it’s not going to satisfy John, far too vague for a man who always wants to push and fix and turn things over to inspect from every angle, but it buys him more time to think.

“I’m sorry,” John says after a few beats of silence, and Gale balks, expecting another prodding question.

“Don’t be,” he murmurs, glancing at John when he slows at a stop sign, finding guilt painted over his face. “It’s not your fault.”

It’s not, really. Or at least, it shouldn’t be; he shouldn’t have to worry about who his best friend cozies up with, shouldn’t have to worry about someone taking it the wrong way and mentioning it to the wrong person. It’s not John’s fault that he worries. Gale just wishes he were more careful.

They drive in silence for another minute before John speaks again.

“You’re not mad at me?” He asks meekly. Gale furrows his brows, caught off guard, tension in his chest unravelling as his heart takes over.

“Of course not,” he says immediately, softening his voice like he’s talking down a startled animal. “Why would you think that?”

He sees John shrug in his periphery, but Gale stays quiet, giving him time to choose his words as they turn onto the last stretch of road, the lights by the gate visible in the distance.

“Don’t wanna go back yet,” John says instead of answering, and Gale slows as they approach the gate, looking at him warily.

“It’s late,” he says, but he keeps driving past the base anyway, not wanting John to have to go to bed feeling unsettled.

“Just a bit longer,” John insists gently, and Gale nods, picking a winding dirt road to kill time on.

He thinks he’d drive forever, away from all of this, if John asked him to.

Chapter End Notes

> Hellooo, long time no see!! Thanks for your patience with this one– there was actually meant to be three more scenes in this chapter, but it was already so long that I decided I'd split it into

two to avoid a 10k word chapter and a month in between updates lmaoo so apologies for how dialogue–heavy it was. <3

Also Jameson and Tom are complete mystery men to be clear; I literally scoured the archive to try to find names that didn't match with pre–existing characters because I doubt they'll come up in this fic again. :-)

Thank you so so sooo much again for all the encouragement and love on the last chapter gahhh :((<33 I'm so serious when I say I go through and reread the comments every time I need that final push to sit down and write, it fills my heart right up and I feel so appreciative and so lucky. :')) <3 Hugshugshugs.

And thank you as always to my #1 curtsbigspoon for hyping me up and beta–ing all of these chapters mwahhh love u <3

I'm over on my tumblr posting updates for this fic, brainrotting, answering drabble prompts, etc etc as usual if you wanna hang between updates. Thank you a million times for reading my take on these sweet boys and for giving me so much patience and grace as I navigate writing something chaptered for the first time in years!! <33 See you in the next one. :^) x

How Long Do I Have Left With My Dog?

Chapter Summary

> “Y’know if it was anyone else, the boys would read into it more,” Gale presses, willing John to see reason, to understand his concern. “Hell, they might be reading into it as is.”
>
> He doesn’t mention that he’d spent the evening with his head on a swivel, watching the others like a hawk while John played with fire. A gambling man, through and through.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gale realizes, as he and John sit facing each other in the back of the Jeep that night, legs squished side by side to fit lengthwise on the seat, that John always comes back to him.

Things might be touch–and–go now and then, and that’s something Gale knows he just has to make peace with– he doesn’t want to tame that wild, unruly thing in John, and he’s not sure John would let him if he tried. But it doesn’t matter anyway, because in the end the loyal hound wins out and finds its way back to his side, that invisible leash ever present even when he begins to doubt it.

Sometimes it takes a little tug, or a gentle outstretched hand and a bit of coaxing, but the years have proven this one thing to be true. It’s one of the only things Gale can always bet on, one of the only consistent things in his life right now, one of the only consistent things he’s *ever* had.

So it scares him to see John get careless, to witness his disregard for the consequences of his recklessness, to disrupt the careful balance they’ve worked to cultivate in an environment so foreign. Gale feels like it’s selfish to ask him to simmer down for his sake, but if John won’t do it for himself, he wonders if it might be more productive to word it as something that *Gale* needs, even if it’s taking advantage of the boundless propensity to please that John’s shown time and time again. If it’s for John’s own good in the long run, Gale thinks maybe it’s alright to be a little bit selfish.

The handle of the car door presses against his lower back as he loses himself in his contemplations, and he adjusts himself, feeling the side

of John's boot dig into his thigh where it's pinned against the back of the seat. It's a reminder of how much has changed since they were scrawny boys in Texas, squeezing side by side in the back of a car with ease for late night talks about things that seem so trivial now in comparison.

Gale studies the side of John's face as John stares distantly out the back window, wondering if he's thinking about those simpler times too. He's about to bring it up as a way to soften things while he figures out how to get into what he really wants to talk about, but John turns to face him and shifts to lean forward a bit.

A firm hand wraps around his ankle just above his boot and tugs his leg up and over to drape it across both of John's, making the seat less cramped. John looks at him as if waiting for him to challenge the action, hackles always ready to rise, but Gale just gives him a gentle smile and leans his head back against the window. John relaxes slightly, though he doesn't remove his hand.

"We've grown, huh?" He murmurs, and John hums, nodding. Gale waits, but so does John, so he exhales slow, continuing.

"Someday things are gonna feel alright again, y'know?" He fixes his eyes on John's, sincere as he can muster. To John's credit, he tries his best to look convinced, but Gale can see right through him.

"Sure," John placates, dropping his eyes to where his hand rests on Gale's ankle, absently fidgeting with the laces on Gale's boot.

Gale watches the slight shake in his fingers that whiskey can't mask, and chooses his words carefully. John's not as drunk as he usually gets on nights out, but he knows it's a fine line between easing John's unfiltered thoughts out and starting an argument.

He decides to rip off the bandaid.

"You gotta be careful, John. Especially so soon after," he gestures vaguely, as if saying Jameson's name would be too direct an accusation, too pointed to expect John to keep his walls down.

John keeps his gaze lowered, clearing his throat, tugging at Gale's shoelace until it unravels.

"Don't know what you're talking about."

Gale nearly rolls his eyes, fully aware of the angle John's going for,

hoping to push until Gale says something outright.

“Y’know if it was anyone else, the boys would read into it more,” he presses, willing John to see reason, to understand his concern. “Hell, they might be reading into it as is.”

He doesn’t mention that he’d spent the evening with his head on a swivel, watching the others like a hawk while John played with fire. A gambling man, through and through.

“Nothing to read into,” John shrugs easily, like he doesn’t have Gale stressed to his wit’s end, and Gale wants to shake him. It doesn’t matter if John knows exactly what Gale’s trying to say or not– he needs to *know* that John gets it, for his own sanity.

“Even if it *is* nothing, they might see it as something,” he says cautiously. He bumps his boot against John’s knuckles when he doesn’t get a response, the string slipping from between his fingers.

John makes no effort to pick it back up, wrapping his hand back around his ankle instead, palm warm through the fabric of his pants, setting off a restless hum beneath Gale’s skin. John eyes him, and Gale can tell he’s working his words over behind his closed lips, careful for once.

“It wasn’t just *something,”* he eventually gets out, fingers flexing against his leg. “With me and Curt, it wasn’t just something to pass the time, it was–”

John’s face twists like it hurts just to think about him. Gale’s mouth is dry. He suddenly wants to stuff this conversation back into the box it came from and bury it somewhere far, far away.

“I loved him, I think.”

Something heavy tries to claw its way up Gale’s throat, an amalgamation of all the grief and mourning and longing that have built up in his lungs like tar. He feels like he’s choking on it as much as he’s choking on the raw honesty of John’s words, on the secret he’s been trusted with.

“I’m sorry.”

It’s all he can think to say, feeling useless and hollowed out. He wishes he could reach inward and crack open his sternum and make a safe place for John to crawl inside and be shielded from everything unkind

and unjust. He wishes he could have shielded Curt there, too.

John shakes his head, eyes going dark before they return to looking out the back window, and Gale regrets ever pushing.

“How can it be wrong?” John’s voice comes out smaller than Gale expects, and his heart aches something fierce.

“It’s not,” he says firmly. And he believes that, wholeheartedly.

“I’m *undesirable,* Buck. You hear how they talk about people like me.”

“John.”

“Like some fuckin’ disease.” John’s touch retracts, and Gale’s not sure whether it’s intentional or not, but he doesn’t want John thinking for one second that he might ever think that way about him.

He pulls his leg off of John’s, bending it at the knee, and watches fear flicker across his face for a brief moment before he’s kneeling in the sliver of space between John’s leg and the back of the seat, knee half–resting on John’s thigh.

“People say a lotta dumb shit, John,” Gale reaches out, placing a hand on John’s shoulder. He feels stupid, doesn’t know how to do comforting touches the way John does, hopes the sentiment alone is good enough.

“Doesn’t make ‘em right. Sure would be the first time you agreed with something just ‘cause someone’s voice might be louder than yours, though,” Gale teases softly, squeezing his shoulder.

“Maybe,” John offers him a weak smile, and Gale gives him one back, sliding his hand down John’s arm and resting it where it bends at his side.

He thinks– fleetingly, though he thinks it nonetheless– that maybe it wouldn’t be so bad, getting sent out of here with John, social suicide or not. At least he’d have some sort of control over his life, and he wouldn’t wake up every morning wondering if he’ll get to see another, or wondering if each goodbye might be his last.

He realizes how closely his sober thoughts are echoing John’s drunken ones that have rattled around in his head since their argument at the start of summer, and it scares him. He can’t start thinking like that too.

“You don’t…” Gale pauses, thinking. “Why d’you tell me these things?”

John balks, appearing torn between offense and confusion, and Gale quickly tries to amend his words.

“You don’t get scared of me telling someone?”

John breathes out a laugh at the notion, but he does look uncertain for a moment, eyes dancing around Gale’s face.

“You gonna?”

Gale shakes his head immediately, shoving at John’s shoulder.

“Course not,” he huffs, frowning. “Idiot.”

That gets a proper laugh out of John, and warmth spreads through Gale’s body, not realizing how cold he’d gotten with his back pressed against the door.

“I know you,” John says simply. Gale nods.

“Well, y’know you can tell me what’s on your mind then, always,” he murmurs, pressing the pad of his thumb into the crook of John’s inner elbow. “You don’t have to hide stuff from me.”

John stares at him, long enough that Gale wonders if he said something wrong, shifting nervously.

But John’s other arm raises, and a warm palm finds Gale’s cheek, and Gale’s heart leaps skyward, lodging itself in his throat as he goes still. John’s gaze lowers to where his skin meets Gale’s, and his eyes soften with something wordless before he drops his hand back to his side, leaning back against the window with a small smile.

“Yeah,” John mumbles. “You too.”

Sleep is a lot harder to fall into, as the days crawl on. Gale’s usually good at shutting his brain off and clocking out when it’s time, falling into a natural rhythm, but lately he’s lucky if he can sink his teeth into slumber before midnight.

He chalks it up to all the activity ramping up, everyone’s nerves fried from the constantly changing tides, but it makes it worse that he can’t

sleep the exhaustion off like he needs to. John doesn't seem much better off, quick to fall asleep but rarely staying that way through the night; Gale often hears him tossing and turning while he's still lying awake waiting for his eyelids to get heavy enough to drag him under.

Some nights Gale gets antsy enough that he just needs to walk it off, so his late night walks– or early morning, depending on how long sleep evades him– become more frequent. He's not sure how effective it is, but it gives him something to do aside from burying his face in his pillow and mulling over the same thoughts over and over again, so it's better than nothing.

And so he finds himself bundling up late one night to walk off the excess jitters as his brain demands, reaching for his boots when he hears John's bed creak, blankets rustling.

"Buck?" The hoarse voice has Gale squinting in the dark to see John peering back at him.

"Goin' for a walk," he whispers. "Go back to sleep."

He pulls one boot on, lacing it up when John goes quiet, but then the bed creaks again.

"It's three a.m," John mumbles dazedly, evidently having glanced at his watch.

"Can't sleep. I'll be back in a bit," Gale assures him, doing up his other boot and standing. John shifts, his blanket sliding down as he props himself up, blinking tiredly up at him.

"Well, I can't sleep either," John watches him reach for his jacket, seemingly expectant, though Gale's not sure what for.

"Okay," he says, confused, stopping in front of the door.

"Can I come too?" John asks, looking entirely too drowsy for a brisk walk.

"It's cold," he warns him, but John's already rolling out of bed the moment he processes Gale hasn't given him a 'no,' stumbling into his pants, dog–tags clinking against each other in his haste.

Gale waits patiently as John gets his own boots on, biting back a comment when he reaches for a light sweater rather than his jacket, not wanting to nag a grown man. John always runs hot anyway, much

to Gale's envy.

He returns John's bleary smile as he opens the door, waiting for him to shuffle past before following him out, shutting it quietly.

It's a lot colder than he expects, October announcing its arrival in the form of dew–covered grass and clouds of mist puffing out with each breath, and he shoves his hands in his pockets to protect them from the frost.

John ambles after him as he sets off on his usual route, detouring around the barracks to avoid the glare of the light posts as best as he can, gravel crunching under two sets of boots. The company is nice, though he'd feel a lot better knowing John was getting some restful sleep, but he'd be a hypocrite if he told him that.

"Did I wake you?" Gale asks instead, glancing at John apologetically, but John looks up from his effort to avoid muddy puddles to shake his head. Gale supposes it's a silly question; John sleeps like a rock, dead to disturbances made by anything other than his own brain.

"Just my sixth sense," John says, shrugging and shooting him a small smile. Gale breathes out a laugh.

"You got a radar for me?" He teases, and John smiles wider, eyes crinkling.

"Built in," he answers matter–of–factly, raising a hand and making a fist over the center of his chest before dropping it, returning his vigilant gaze to the uneven ground. Gale stares for a moment longer, floored not for the first time by John's apparent obliviousness to the weight of his sentimentality. Even knowing John how he does, it's always unexpected coming from someone who a stranger might assume to be brazen and surface–level; John's loud mouth and wandering hands do him no favours in that regard.

But Gale *does* know John, like an extension of himself half the time, and still he manages to render him speechless. The way his heart flutters as the sentiment hangs in the air makes Gale want to reach down his throat and squeeze it until it never beats again.

John starts shivering next to him a few minutes in, shoulders hunched, and Gale resists reminding him of his earlier warning, instead moving close enough that their arms brush against each other's in a futile effort to transfer some heat. John takes the invitation and runs with it, gravitating closer still until it's an effort to stay walking in a straight

line with the press of his broad frame, and Gale has to fight back a smile.

“You do this often?” John breaks the silence, voice still gravelly with sleep.

“Helps settle the restlessness sometimes,” Gale replies, and John hums in understanding, falling quiet for a minute before he speaks again.

“You just, uh, do loops?” John asks, and Gale nods. “Cool.”

Another minute passes, and then: “For how long, usually?” Gale can’t hold back a snort, seeing right through the casual inquiries.

“You can go back if you’re cold, John,” he says, amused, but John declines with a shake of his head. It’s sweet, the determination to keep him company; it takes the bite of the cold away just a bit.

Even so, Gale only does one loop, knowing John will be too stubborn to go back to bed while he walks a few more, and John sighs in relief when they circle around to their door, bouncing impatiently on the spot while he waits for Gale to open it. They undress hastily, eager to be back under warm blankets, but when Gale sits down on his bed, John trails after him rather than heading to his own.

Gale levels him with a flat stare, and John has enough self awareness to look bashful for about half a second before he slumps his shoulders, tilting his head back.

“I’m *freezing,* Gale,” he gripes dramatically, near pouting, and Gale knows damn well he’s playing it up for pity. It works, though he tells himself it’s only because he knows as soon as John warms up, he’ll have a human furnace against his back.

“Whose fault is that?” He retorts, even as he slides over to make room behind himself, huffing out a quiet laugh at how pleased John looks with his win as he rounds the foot of the bed.

“You’re always keepin’ me out of trouble, Buck,” John exhales heavily when he collapses on the mattress, jostling Gale around as he shimmies under the blanket, getting comfortable. “I was just returning the favour. Wouldn’t be fair for me to let you walk all alone at night.”

“Sure, Bucky,” Gale says, calling John on his bluff with the tone of his voice alone. The retaliation is immediate, an icy hand sliding under his shirt to press flat against his back, and he arches away with a gasp,

flipping over to glare at his assailant.

He can see John's grin in the dark, blanket tucked up over his head so only his face is visible, and it's hard to stay irritated, reaching out and flicking him on the forehead before quickly retracting his hand back into the building warmth beneath the blanket.

"Keep your frozen paws to yourself," Gale grumbles, but John's smile only grows.

"Or what?" He pushes, cheek squished against the pillow from the force of his grin.

Gale narrows his eyes, trying to decide whether he has the energy to wrestle John out of his bed if he doesn't relent, and no, he doesn't. It's late and he's finally growing tired and he doesn't feel like ending up on his ass on the cold floor.

"Or you'll find out what cold is when I send you back to your own bed," he settles on, raising his eyebrows, and John sighs, rolling his eyes.

"You're no fun," he complains, but his hands don't stray again. As Gale drifts off minutes later, John's steady breaths tickling the hairs over his forehead, he wishes for a fleeting moment that they would. The thought is gone as fast as it forms.

John's arm hangs loose over the back of Gale's chair, a constant weight against his neck as the celebrations unfold around them. The music swings loud and upbeat, the large room bathed in the glow of artificial orange and yellow lights, bodies mingling about in dance.

That's really all the majority of them are at this point– bodies, with more than half of the faces in the crowd unfamiliar to Gale. It makes him feel out of place despite having been there first, wondering if soon he'll go down and be replaced by a stranger, another number on the charts. The more time that passes, the emptier the mess hall gets every morning, the quieter the briefing room becomes before each mission, the more he begins to believe it's a matter of when, not if.

Gale doesn't have to voice these feelings to John to know he shares them. His usual boisterous performance when greeting new recruits is dulled down tonight, a careful shield in place over his face, eyes glassy like he's miles away.

Even the alcohol isn't enough to bring John to life; it seems like it's doing the opposite, drawing him further into whatever shell he's constructed for himself to get through the evening. Gale wishes he could do the same, but more than ever he feels like he needs to be present, both to keep an eye on John, and to fill in the gap his abnormal silence creates. He's spent countless nights leaning on John's chattering to breeze through social situations he's felt out of his league in, so he doesn't mind stepping in for once.

He doesn't have to make mindless conversation for long though, because Colonel Harding makes his way over to their table, commanding everyone's attention and straightened backs with his presence alone, glasses finding their way back to coasters.

"Listen up, boys," Harding says, pulling back an empty chair and sitting himself down with a sigh, any troops in the nearby vicinity gathering themselves round.

"I just had a mood killing conversation with Doc Stover," he continues, and Gale's eyes dart from his stoic face to the casual lean in his chair, the juxtaposing body language not helping him to decipher whether something's actually wrong. He looks briefly at John, and John seems just as wary, so he turns his attention back to the colonel, working a toothpick between the corner of his lips.

"Now, y'know what he thinks?" Harding draws them all in with a breath of a pause, eyes scanning their faces to ensure his hook has snared them.

"He thinks you *sissies* could be getting flakhappy."

Amidst the "no sir"s and "not us, sir"s that echo around the table, Gale feels rather than hears John's breath catch, posture going rigid at his side. His own teeth clench around the sliver of wood, birch compressing between his molars. The warmth against the back of his neck recedes in a swift brush of fabric, John's hands discreetly clasping together in his lap beneath the table, shoulders setting defiantly.

It's a term Gale normally wouldn't blink an eye at, thrown around often by the others, with or without the intention of using it for the hateful weight it carries. But with his and John's backseat conversation still relatively fresh in his mind, it has him holding back a wince, very aware of what must be running through John's head.

He risks a careful glance to his right as Harding goes on about

cavemen and headshrinks, and he's met with the harsh set of John's jaw, dark blue eyes gone even more overcast as he stares dead ahead at their colonel.

Gale is struck with the realization that John might actually snap, the careless word choice putting the final nail in the coffin, justifying the itch to fight that Gale's been doing his best to curb, and fear shoots down his spine ice–cold. He's not sure whether John has enough alcohol in his system yet to take that kind of risk, but he doesn't want to find out.

Hastily, he combs through his arsenal of tried and true John Deescalation Techniques, and then, ensuring both his and John's chairs are tucked well underneath the tabletop, he cautiously lifts his hand from his lap and moves it until the backs of his knuckles brush against the side of John's thigh.

John flinches so microscopically that Gale only picks up on it from the way the fabric of his pants shifts against his hand, and he nearly retracts his touch when he feels it. But John doesn't move away, so neither does he, instead relaxing his arm as much as he can without his body having to lean into the movement, letting his palm rest just above John's knee.

In his periphery, he can see the way John tilts his head towards him over so slightly, a silent question, but Gale keeps his eyes on Harding as he traces the edge of his coaster with his other hand, trying to tune his brain back into the conversation.

"What counts is that you soldiers show up ready and able to fight, hm?" Harding is rallying them back up, fist on the table like a call to action, and it works like a charm.

"What you do between battles…" Harding raises an eyebrow, a smirk playing at his lips, the men around the table falling into knowing laughter and jeers.

John huffs out a laugh too, one well disguised as amusement, but coated in bitterness to Gale's well trained ears. He'd be willing to wager a good chunk of cash that he knows exactly what John's thinking– that none of them would be so nonchalant if they knew what John got up to between battles.

The bitterness is no fault of Harding's specifically; he's a fine leader, good for morale. He just happens to be hitting all the unspoken sore spots tonight, and John just happens to be susceptible. Gale feels his

leg tense beneath his palm, and that's the only warning he gets before John opens his mouth.

"I like your style, *sir,"* John drawls out, some sort of challenge fizzling just beneath the surface, and Gale turns slowly, pinning him with a disbelieving stare. He hears Harding chuckle, but mercifully he doesn't take John's bait, turning his attention to the lackluster decorations the men have scraped together for the party.

John leans forward in his seat like he's going to play verbal roulette a second time, one dodged bullet not enough to dampen his gambling spirit. Gale's ready this time though, quietly clearing his throat and squeezing John's thigh in warning, muscle strung taut beneath his fingers. John glances at him, expression vulnerable in his surprise.

Conflicted eyes only meet his own for half a second, but Gale sees a flicker of acceptance in them just before John turns away, hackles lowering as he backs down, a stern look and firm hand as effective as any muzzle.

The irritation in John's body language lifts, shoulders rising and falling slow on a deep breath, and Gale can't help but feel a rush of pride, his own apprehension melting away. Disaster averted, he removes his hand, head spinning when the motion rattles him with a sensory replay of muscle giving beneath his fingers. He balls his fist up reflexively as if to squeeze away the sensation, nails biting into his palm, and then he unfurls it, the tips of his ears growing warm.

He elects to drape his arm over the back of John's chair instead, a mirror of their earlier positions, easy and casual with it like a whole silent conversation hasn't just stretched between the two of them, like his hand isn't missing the warmth of another man's thigh.

It does the trick regardless of what's going on in Gale's head, with John subtly leaning back in his chair to press closer to his arm, strained posture settling into something much more appropriate for celebratory drinks and light conversation.

It's something.

"You need a break."

John leans back against the bar, elbows braced on the wood counter, eyes following the twisted paths the streamers make where they hang

in arcs across the ceiling. He makes a noncommittal noise at Gale's comment, and Gale's not convinced he actually heard what he said.

"I think the colonel oughta fix you up a weekend pass," he presses, brushing his shoulder against John's.

Harding would, Gale knows that. It's no secret that recent events have been weighing heavy on everyone, and they can't afford to have one of their best pilots lose their nerve mid–flight; he's willing to go advocate for John, if John won't do it for himself.

John lolls his head to the side, eyeing him as he seemingly mulls his suggestion over. His eyelids are droopy the way they always get when he's sufficiently plastered, every movement a little sluggish, a liquor–induced flush settled over the bridge of his nose.

John hums his assent, then lowers his gaze to his boots for a beat before looking back up.

"You should come," he says, almost imploringly, and the way those blue eyes come alight with his carefully placed optimism makes Gale want to throw caution to the wind. It scares him, how easily John can make him think bad ideas are good, even if only for a moment.

He doesn't really know *why* he's so reluctant to go– he just feels, somehow, that if he does go, nothing will be the same by the end of the weekend, and he's not sure he's ready to face whatever that might mean.

John must see the hesitation on his face, because he abruptly lets a lazy smile stretch across his own, the kind that lets Gale know any clumsily–hidden sincerity has left his noggin.

"London. Let's do it up, Buck," John leans in, bumping his shoulder against Gale's this time, mischief glimmering on the points of his canines. "Paint the town red."

"You've got trouble painted all over your *face,* John," Gale stalls, adjusting his sleeve. "Not sure the whole of London needs to be subjected to it, too."

John snorts, shaking his head.

"C'mon," he presses, so hopeful that Gale has to look away, eyes falling on Meatball's curled up form. It's as good a distraction as any; he's afraid that if he lets John keep on pleading, he's not going to have

the strength to deny him what he wants.

“Maybe,” Gale pacifies, straightening up, feeling John’s gaze follow him as he steps over to Meatball. He sees a dark curl fall loose over John’s eyebrow when he dips his head to watch Gale scoop Meatball into his arms, standing back up with a good amount of effort as a wet nose nuzzles at his cheek.

“Really?” John huffs, spiteful over his choice of a dancing partner. Meatball’s presence is still a touchy thing with John, and it never fails to amuse Gale, though he still hasn’t pointed out the ridiculousness of his blatant jealousy. It’s much more fun to observe, and he knows John would just deny it anyway.

“I don’t need you crushing my feet before I fly,” Gale teases, draping a big paw over each shoulder as he walks backwards to the swing of the song.

“At least I don’t have *four* left feet,” John complains, though he makes no move to follow after Gale, leaning back against the counter as if content to watch the show the unconventional duo provides.

Gale doesn’t reply, only giving John a smile and a small wink before burying his face in thick fur, hiding the way his cheeks go a little warm at the thought of swaying to the music with his hands on either side of a sturdy waist. He focuses on the thump of Meatball’s tail against his hip as he shuffles the two of them in slow circles, ignoring how quickly the dog’s body becomes uncomfortably heavy, terrified that if he sets Meatball down, he’ll get an armful of John before he has a chance to come up with another flimsy excuse for keeping his distance.

He’s saved soon enough by some of the new recruits coming over to coo at Meatball, giving him a reason to relieve himself of the weight as he fields dog–related questions, a welcome break from mission talk and flattery he’ll never know how to respond to.

He can feel John watching him the whole time, and eventually he joins the little congregation, exchanging pleasantries, but Gale can tell his heart isn’t in it; he feels the same reluctance to connect with newcomers when they seem to lose them the moment they unpack their things. He does his best to make them feel welcome all the same, but it’s too painful to get attached, as guilty as it makes him feel to think that way. They’re all someone’s son.

The celebrations wind down as the evening turns to night, the band

beginning to pack up their instruments, the bartender wiping down the counter. John tosses an arm over Gale's shoulders and asks him whether it might be time to start heading to bed.

"Long day," John addresses the others in explanation after Gale nods, and the boys take the hint, saluting the two of them and bidding them goodnight.

John steers him to the door, Meatball padding along at their heels until they pawn him off on DeMarco on the way out.

"What's your big hurry?" Gale asks, bemused by John's sudden persistence as they step out through the double doors. He follows John's gaze, and his question is answered when he sees Harding's retreating back in the distance, heading to his office to wrap up for the day.

"Wanna catch Harding before he turns in for the night," John says, giving Gale a smile, cheeks rosy. His brisk pace falters then, brows furrowing.

"You'll– you'll ask him for us, right?" John asks sheepishly, and Gale doesn't know whether he's batting his lashes at him intentionally, but either way he has to avert his eyes.

"I'll ask," Gale lies through his teeth, wanting to delay John's inevitable disappointment.

He does ask, after he tells John to stay put outside the office.

"I think a weekend pass would do Egan some good, sir," Gale stands in front of Harding's desk, hands clasped behind his back, the low lamplight accentuating the colonel's cheekbones as he looks up at him thoughtfully.

"I think you're right," he nods, opening a drawer and reaching for a form, then pausing and glancing up. "You don't want one?"

Gale swallows, taking a breath to anchor himself; one final test of his resolve, temptation dangled in front of him on a string, all too easy to reach for.

He shakes his head.

"No, sir," he says, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "Figure we're short–handed as is."

Harding's expression morphs into one of quiet approval, but Gale feels undeserving of it, knowing his real reason for staying on base is anything but selfless.

When he steps back outside, John is waiting obediently right where he left him, leaning against the wall, cigarette in hand. His head snaps up when he hears the door, taking one last pull of the smoke before stubbing it out.

"Well?" He asks, so hopeful it almost makes Gale turn back around to tell Harding he's changed his mind and wants a pass as well. He begins walking instead so he doesn't have to see John's face fall, and John promptly falls into step with him, the smell of tobacco engulfing him.

"Those Londoners better hide away tomorrow," Gale attempts to joke, but it comes out a bit flat. John laughs anyway, clapping him between his shoulder blades, sliding his hand down to rest on the small of his back.

"You too?" He asks expectantly, and Gale exhales, shaking his head.

"No luck," he says regretfully. He feels awful lying, aware that he's been making a nasty habit of it lately, but he justifies it to himself with the intention behind it– sparing both of them hurt feelings. Or something like that.

"Damn," John deflates, giving his side a squeeze before he drops his hand. "I'm sorry."

"S'alright," Gale assures him, tongue thick with guilt. "Can't afford to have two pilots on leave at once, is all."

"I don't think it would've been a good idea for me to go, anyway." It's as close to a confession as ever, and the moment it leaves his mouth, Gale doesn't know why he's said it. It's too honest.

"Why?" John asks immediately, frown evident in his voice, and Gale can feel his searching eyes on the side of his face without turning to meet them. There are a few things that feel right to answer with, but even if he knew how to word them, he's not willing to say them out loud, not right now, anyway.

"You'll get the whole room to yourself, at least," he ignores the question, keeping his tone light. "It'll be nice."

John looks at him for a moment longer, then returns his gaze to the gravel path, nodding.

“Next time, then?” He asks.

“Next time,” Gale promises. He may not be a gambling man, but he wants to have hope he can bet on being less of a coward next time. Chips all–in.

John leans heavy on him for the rest of the walk back, like he’s trying to fuse the two of them together, soaking up as much of Gale as he can before he leaves.

Gale almost wonders whether John will find Harding in the morning and talk his way out of his pass, with how reluctant he seems to leave his side by the time they turn in for bed. But the next day, Gale finds himself leaning against the driver’s side door of a Jeep, chin resting on his folded arms as he looks up at John.

“I’ll bring something back for you,” John smiles down at him, one hand on the wheel, the other pressing knuckles gently against his cheek for half a second before he returns it to his lap. Gale wonders whether his face is warm to the touch, but if John notices, he doesn’t mention it.

“Like what?” Gale smiles back, aware that they’re both delaying, certain John is aware too.

“Well, it wouldn’t be as fun if I told you,” John says fondly, and Gale sighs, nodding.

“Guess you’re right.”

Gale looks up at him for another moment, squinting against the October sun, the distant warmth doing little to dull the chill of the crisp morning air.

“Fly safe,” John finally says, unsuccessful in masking his concern. Gale straightens up, tilting his chin to gesture to the cloudless horizon.

“Nothin’ but blue skies, John,” he quips easily, and it melts some of the worry off of John’s face, crooked grin returning.

“You’re spending too much time with me, Buck,” John shakes his head, starting the car, and Gale takes a step back, patting the side of the vehicle.

“See? Your leave’ll do us both some good,” he says, and John nods, though Gale doubts John believes it anymore than he does.

“I’ll see you Monday, Major,” Gale raises his hand, giving John a mock–salute.

“Monday it is,” John returns the gesture, shooting him one last look before he drives off through the gates. Gale watches the car until he rounds the corner, feeling like he’s left a piece of himself in the passenger seat.

The thought makes him scoff at himself, turning away and beginning his walk to the briefing room.

Gale knows the moment he calls for bail out that he’s not going to be seeing John on Monday.

He watches his men step off into the endless blue one by one, heart pounding, ignoring every instinct to jump from his seat as he fights to keep the plane steady. Then it’s his turn to rush for the exit, metal floor shuddering beneath his boots, ammunition casings knocking around as smoke rolls out in thick dark plumes from the plane’s engines.

The last thought Gale has before air is rushing past him and all that’s below his feet is miles of nothingness is that he wishes he hadn't wasted so much time.

Chapter End Notes

> Happy pride! Damn, these bitches gay!
>
> That feels too lighthearted a greeting for what this chapter was, but I'll make up for it with the next surely. Thank you sooo much for keeping the faith in me even with the long gaps between updates– it means the world, but hopefully it won't be as far between this chapter and the next! This one was a lot longer than usual and took so much more time to write because I really wanted to make sure I got the dialogue right with how heavy a lot of stuff the boys are dealing with is. <\3
>
> I went back to reread comments on the other chapters at least three times a week while writing this one ngl, smiling like an idiot every time, heart so very full. I know I get sappy with every

author's note, but I really do just want to make it clear how fucking much I appreciate every word; my favourites folder on my phone is full of screenshots of comments lol :') I feel SO lucky. Gah

Thank youuu curtsbigspoon for being patient with my insanity while writing. I feel so lucky knowing I can count on you to be honest, and extra lucky that my best friend doubles as my favourite writer who I get free advice from teehee. <33 You know how much I mean it when I say I couldn't do this without you. Stone in my shoe. Other half. Betting on it. Etc! x

As always, you can find me on my tumblr posting updates for this fic, brainrotting, answering drabble prompts, etc etc if you wanna hang and see where I'm at progress-wise between updates! Thank you thank you thank you x23894 for the love and motivation; it makes me so excited to write. Cannot wait to see you in the next chapter, and hope you're all having a wonderful pride month so far. :-) xx

I Count My Time In Dog Years

Chapter Summary

> Gale's never been able to fully understand the spiral that good men find themselves in prior to losing their mind– he's always operated under the assumption that it would be easy enough to catch a loose screw and twist it back in before anything slides out of place. But now, barely two days in this grim confine and already floundering as hard as he is, he has a new appreciation for how fast that descent can sneak up on a man.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gale falls for what feels like forever, the great big arc of his chute coming between him and the sun like a shield Icarus was never granted the kindness of, up and up and up until his wings cease to exist, and all he's left with are his own four limbs and billowing nylon and the boundless blue sky as he plummets.

Except Gale never hits the sea, or the ground.

The force of his landing paired with an untimely gust of wind sends him barrelling through the door of an unassuming farmhouse, prongs of a pitchfork pinning him to the floor by his chest without a moment to gasp out a proper defense, his poor recollection of basic German doing nothing to settle the angry farmer.

His close call with a scalding stove–top is the least of his concerns when he's dragged back out the door by the scruff of his jacket and thrown unceremoniously onto the dirt, no time to breathe let alone feel the relief of solid earth beneath his hands and knees as the sound of a gun being cocked echoes so loud it may as well have gone off. A boot meets his side in a harsh enough kick that he's knocked onto his back, and his face stings when he winces, growing conscious of the hot liquid that trickles from his cheek and into the hair at his temple. He wants to press his fingers there, assess the damage and wipe away the blood that creeps closer to obscuring his vision, but he keeps his wrists pinned to the dirt on either side of his head so as to not give the farmer's trigger finger reason to twitch.

The man is shouting into the house to his wife, and Gale doesn't pick

up on much of anything other than *Amerikaner!* and *Polizei!,* but then the man is barking commands at him, and he doesn't need to understand German to get the message– don't move. He's never felt *less* like moving, staring down the barrel of a shotgun, though his heart's pounding so hard he's scared the force of it might cause his whole body to lurch.

The farmer's eyes are as wild as Gale is sure his own look, gaze jumping between Gale's face and hands in search of a hint of movement, and as the minutes tick on while the man presumably waits for authorities to respond to his wife's call, he seems to get antsier, staring down at Gale. He must decide he's less of a threat if he's unable to see what's going on, because he gestures with his gun for Gale to turn back over, and he does so with bated breath, terrified of moving too fast or too slow and giving the man an excuse to shoot.

He keeps his hands visible above his head, trembling as he carefully maneuvers himself onto his stomach, turning so his uninjured cheek is pressed to the earth. The farmer steps closer then, and Gale can hear his gun click as he raises it, and his heart nosedives into the dirt, eyes squeezing shut.

All he can think about is how John's going to be told that his best friend's body was found on a farm with a bullet–hole through his skull, and how John's going to blame himself forever for leaving, and then there's a blinding pain at the back of his skull as the butt of the shotgun slams down, and the world is snuffed out.

When Gale drags himself from the fog of unconsciousness, he's on his back, and the ground is moving beneath him in a way that rattles his skull, worsening the headache he immediately becomes aware of. He blinks his eyes open to find it's a lot darker than it was before, but he doesn't feel like he's been out that long, so he's abruptly hit with the horrifying thought that he's lost a good chunk of his vision, cursing under his breath.

But then there's movement, a hopeful murmur of his name permeating the ringing of his ears, and DeMarco comes into view as he crouches next to him, so much dried blood coating one side of his face that Gale would think he's having some sort of night terror due to the sight, if he wasn't so acutely aware of the throbbing pain in his head.

"*Jesus,* Buck," DeMarco breathes out a heavy sigh of relief, squeezing

his shoulder. “Couldn’t wake you up. Thought you were dead when they tossed you in here.”

Gale’s quickly figuring out that *here* seems to be the floor of a dank, boarded off train car, only dim slivers of light permeating here and there through small gaps.

“You seen yourself? No room to be talkin’ about looking dead,” Gale murmurs as he slowly pushes himself up, getting a dry laugh from DeMarco, but both of them know there’s nothing funny about their current standing. As Gale’s eyes adjust, he makes out a few others huddled around the edges of the boxcar, but no one he recognizes, and he finds the same question on DeMarco’s face when he turns back to him.

“The others?” Gale asks, but he knows the answer even before DeMarco shakes his head. His stomach turns. He’d seen all their chutes, but once he’d stepped off the plane, he’d lost track of everything other than which way was up. All he can hope is that they landed far enough away that they had a fighting chance at escaping undetected through the stretches of open farmland he’d done his best to aim for.

“Might’ve slipped away,” DeMarco echoes his thoughts, and Gale nods, sliding himself back until he’s resting against the wall next to his friend.

“Any idea how long it’s been since we went down?” He’s already automatically compartmentalizing, trying to take stock of the situation, giving his brain something to focus on so he can stay level headed and alert. The boxcar jolts, jarring his body, and he grits his teeth against the spike of pain in his skull. An aspirin and a nap would make him feel like a rich man right now.

“Shit, couple’a hours, maybe?” DeMarco guesses, shoving his sleeve up to show him his bare wrist. “Took all our things when they loaded us in, so.”

Gale realizes the familiar weight of his own watch is gone as well, but his dog tags still lean cool against his chest when he presses his palm over his jacket, so he rationalizes that they’re at the very least not on their way to being shot, if they haven't been fully stripped of anything identifying. He doesn’t know if he should be relieved, not feeling all too optimistic about what the near future holds, but he doesn’t voice that thought out loud. He doesn’t want to show that he’s scared; he’s

sure DeMarco's shaken enough, and if he sees Gale is too, it's not going to do anything good for his morale.

But Gale *is* scared.

He's scared every time the train crawls to a stop, more unlucky captives joining them until it's borderline claustrophobic in the boxcar, the cold air turning muggy, thick with fear.

He's scared when they're all rushed out of the train hours later as the day turns to evening, stumbling across winding tracks, herded into a Luftwaffe station on the outskirts of town with foreign shouts filling the air, the relentless barking of dogs coming from outside of the rundown building they're kept in.

As the sun sets, there's a break from the constant dread when familiar faces begin trickling into the building, Gale and DeMarco reuniting with all the members of their crew one by one, and it's a shining beacon of hope amidst the unknown, stoking life back into the fire in his chest.

But the fear settles back in when night blankets everything in darkness, save for the dim glow of the lanterns the guards carry around, and Gale huddles close with the others, the straw floor doing little to insulate body heat. They all try their best to get some sleep anyway, but Gale finds it near impossible with the repetitive back and forth of the wards and the distant clamour of trains, so instead he lays awake and stares at the backs of his eyelids and thinks about his soft bed back in England. And then he thinks about John.

Gale finds himself doing that a lot, as long travel days drag on. The whole weekend is spent transferring from train to train, sleeping briefly at a second station overnight under heavy guard, and there's not much to do but think, once he and the others tire themselves out of talking. It helps him breathe a little easier, picturing John safe and sound in some hotel in the city, full of alcohol and good food and hopefully none the wiser to Gale's plight. Just a day longer of blissful ignorance, enjoying himself without the guilt he's inescapably bound to burden himself with.

He tries not to step into the territory of overthinking, but on Sunday evening everyone is separated and locked up in individual cells, and he's left at the mercy of his sleep–deprived brain with no way of telling what time it is, aside from the tiny bit of light he's granted from a barred–off window that's far too high to see out of.

And then Gale can't stop thinking about how much he *regrets.* How much he would've done differently if he'd known his time with John would be cut so short– all the things he would've said. He feels like the most foolish man alive: bold enough to fly headfirst into flak day after day, but too cowardly to face his feelings with two feet securely on the ground. He wants to believe that everything's going to be fine, and that he'll walk back through those gates at Thorpe Abbotts. Maybe he will. But he's heard the defeated whispers of "could be years" and it's hard to think about years away from his closest friend without sinking into a profound hopelessness.

He thinks about how much blame John's going to shoulder when he gets back and finds out that Gale never returned. He knows John's going to spiral and beat himself up as if there's anything he could've done to change the outcome, and he's sick with worry, heart aching as he realizes that John's not only lost Curt– and a hell of a lot of other friends– but now Gale too, and what does that leave him with when he won't fight for himself?

Gale spends the night in solitary confinement, slipping in and out of sleep as his chest stays heavy with remorse, and he's so tired that he barely feels fear when he's pulled from his cell and brought in for interrogation in the morning, everything blurring together save for the repetition of the same phrase, over and over until his head spins.

Gale Cleven. Major. O–399782.

He's returned to his cell when the interrogator gets sick of him, or gives up on getting any information, or both, and he's left there for the rest of the day. In the evening, everyone is reunited and given back their belongings, and then they're relocated to a new transit camp and separated back into individual cells, identical to the last.

It's the exact same routine from then on– meals slid through the slot in the door, fruitless interrogation attempts, hours upon hours passed staring up at a tiny window or at the hands on his watch until his eyes glaze over.

Gale thinks himself disciplined; probably a lot more used to being made to sit with his nose to a wall than some of the others, thanks to his father's brilliant methods of child–rearing. But by day three, he's already feeling the effects of the silence and mind–numbing lack of stimulation, and a week in, most of the hope he'd held onto feels like a distant memory.

The one thing he keeps returning to is the notion of keeping his head on straight so he can get out of there and get back to John. There is no other way– this is not how their story ends, he can feel it. He feels it so strong some nights that his heart physically stings, pressing against the walls of his ribcage like there's a string wound through the bars of his window tugging harder and harder at his soul, the other end of it wrapped around John's hand an unfathomable stretch of miles away.

Maybe Gale's losing it embarrassingly fast, but the ache is almost strong enough to persuade him it's real, and he thinks maybe it's not that bad to let himself believe it is, if it gets him through this.

Nearly ten days pass by in that tiny cold cell, only being let out for less and less frequent interrogations, each tally hastily scraped into the wall by his bed feeling like a kick in the teeth. Some days he thinks he hears John's voice outside his cell, and there's nothing more cruel than having to convince himself that it's only in his mind, but there's some relief in knowing he's not going to forget the sound of it any time soon.

On the evening of the ninth day, he wakes to a commotion in the hall, and his door opens not too long after, and then it's a blur of bodies and raised voices as he's dragged from his cell and shoved into the throng of prisoners. The setting sun is just a sliver of gold on the horizon when he steps outside for the first time in what seems like months, but the sensation of it against his skin is enough to make him feel like he's coming back to life, even if only for a few seconds before he's herded into the darkness of another boxcar.

And then it's three more days of constant railway travel and cold nights trying to sleep at stations, but it's hard to feel half as miserable as he did in that concrete cell when he's at least *moving,* when he can talk to people and smell the outdoors and hear signs of life beyond the boarded up windows. Gale can tell everyone is in better spirits just from the change in scenery, even if the air is still heavy with uncertainty and fear.

The train comes to a stop for a final time early Sunday morning, and upon stepping outside, Gale is greeted with what seems like endless coils of barbed wire sat atop towering chain link fences. The imposing barriers wrap around acres of land and wooden buildings, guard posts overlooking every inch of the camp, and this, Gale finds out, is where he'll be living out his days for what feels like an impossible amount of time.

The room he and his crew are given in their block is small enough that they have to step out of the way when passing by each other, but there's natural light from the windows and the bunks have mattresses and blankets, so after half a month spent in boxcars and train stations and concrete cells, it might as well be a suite at the Ritz.

Gale sleeps away most of the first day, as do the others, only leaving their block to collect rations and to be checked over by the compound's doctor, and then after some quiet conversation in the evening, they all retire to their bunks once again.

Gale's grateful for the escape his exhaustion provides him, sleep dragging him under fast enough that he doesn't have time to be tormented by the reality of his future. But in the morning, as they all settle around the room with their breakfast, quiet as though they've been collectively shellshocked, it begins to sink in. He feels hollowed out, untethered and stumbling blind, the growing awareness of the infinite stretch of time ahead of him enough to make his hands tremble where they hold his plate and spoon.

And solitary confinement was one thing, but the sensation of suddenly feeling so alone despite looking around at the familiar faces of his crew is a whole different beast. It feels wrong to be lonely when he's surrounded by so many people, and he's thankful to have friends with him, all too aware of how much worse things could've gone for any one of them. But it's hard not to hurt when the one person he wants to talk to most feels further away than ever. They may as well be on completely different planets for how foreign just about every aspect of Gale's new life is, and for how isolated he feels from the outside world after only a day inside those fences.

He wonders for the millionth time what John is doing, if he's alright, if he's gone up since he returned from London, if he's even still–

DeMarco drags him for a walk around the perimeter when he finds him crouched in the slim space between two of the buildings in the afternoon, splintered wood panels digging into his spine as he presses his forehead to his knees. It's embarrassing, having someone see him like that, but DeMarco doesn't comment on it, just offers him a hand and pulls him to his feet and asks if he'll join him for a stroll.

Gale's glad he doesn't pressure him into talking, the movement and companionship enough to shake the downward trajectory of his

thoughts for a little bit. He's sure it helps DeMarco just as much as it helps him, though the troubled expression on his friend's face makes Gale feel even more frustrated at how stuck they all are, despising being so helpless. There's always a certain degree of lack of control in the nature of war, but at least back on base, they could all make themselves useful, feel like they're doing something to drive things forward. Here, life becomes stationary.

By the next day, Gale feels like an animal in a zoo, pacing back and forth along the walls of his enclosure, antsy and keyed up, chest tight.

He's never been able to fully understand the spiral that good men find themselves in prior to losing their mind– he's always operated under the assumption that it would be easy enough to catch a loose screw and twist it back in before anything slides out of place. But now, barely two days in this grim confine and already floundering as hard as he is, he has a new appreciation for how fast that descent can sneak up on a man.

The restlessness is almost worse than anything else, a constant feeling of *something* being just out of his reach, of craving for something to sink his teeth into but not knowing quite what. Gale's always felt like he does a good job at keeping himself busy, but now he's realizing that only applies when there are things to keep himself busy *with,* and it's a disheartening conclusion to come to when there's nothing to be done about it.

He's on what could very well be his hundredth lap of the yard that evening when he notices men rapidly gathering at the fence by the gates, the doors of their blocks swinging open and slamming shut in the haste to join the group, and Gale's got nothing better to do, so he wanders over as well, making his way to DeMarco's side.

"What's going on?" He asks, peering over the tops of people's heads to see a brigade of vehicles drawing closer, kicking up dust behind them.

"I'm hearing there's gonna be some new arrivals," DeMarco says, and shortly after, shouts begin to bounce back and forth between the approaching prisoners and the ones behind the fence, gleeful reunions and exchanges of questions. Gale watches passively, glad to have something to do, but he's not expecting much– until DeMarco grabs at his shoulder.

"Is that– holy *shit,* it's John!"

Gale feels the earth fall out from beneath his feet, lurching forward to

lean on the back of the man in front of him with his heart thumping, ears ringing.

DeMarco joins him with a shout of “Brady!”, and everything comes crashing down so fast he feels sick with the motion.

John *Brady*.

Gale immediately swallows down thick guilt at the disappointment he feels, scolding himself for it. He’s not sure happy is the right word for it given where they are, but of course he’s glad to see Brady and Crank and the others alive and in one piece, even if it’s only to meet the same fate as the rest of them, rotting away behind these damn fences.

He just can’t help the way his eyes sting a little with the sharp pain of dashed hopes– a hope for something he hadn’t even *considered* until that moment. Now, as he watches his friends get herded past the fences to presumably go through the same induction process Gale had been through on his first day, his mind reels with questions, each one so loud it makes his head hurt.

In his room, as they wait for all of them to be released into the general population, Gale sits on his bunk, legs bouncing anxiously where they hang over the edge, and tries to rein his hopes back in as he slowly realizes that there’s a very good chance John and Brady had been flying together. He runs lists in his mind, going through all the names of the fliers that had been left the last time Gale had been on base, mashing together imaginary crews like he's trying to slot together puzzle pieces.

By the time their friends appear in the doorway, Gale has come to the conclusion, with a decent amount of confidence, that John had to have been part of Brady’s crew.

And he wants to be patient as they all reunite, wants to spend an appropriate amount of time celebrating their arrival, but he’s so desperate to get confirmation that his brain is on fire with it. It’s the first time he’s allowed himself to truly think of John being inside the camp, *with him,* and it’s *all* he can think about.

Brady catches his gaze when he steps away from the table, leaning back against one of the bunk’s frames, trying to gather himself as he waits. A knowing look washes over Brady’s face, and Gale feels like he could cry when the man makes his way over, giving him a nod as he joins him in his leaning.

“Not long now,” Brady says before Gale can figure out how to word his question, before he can brace himself for possible disappointment, or worse.

“Until?” Gale presses. He can hardly move.

Brady turns to look at him, throwing an arm over his shoulders, a smile playing at his lips.

“Till your Bucky shows up, of course.”

Gale’s mouth goes dry, eyes jumping around Brady’s face looking for any hint of a joke, as if this is something anyone would be cruel enough to joke about, but Brady isn’t laughing.

“You mean it?” He says, still not quite believing it.

“Ain’t no way he’s much further behind if *I* managed to make it here with all my limbs attached, Buck. You know better than anyone how stubborn that jackass is.” Brady sounds so self–assured that Gale allows himself to feel a little soothed, a bit of the buzz dampening in the electric current he feels like he’s got wired through his veins as he comes to terms with this new information.

Gale shudders out a sigh of relief, though he’s still hesitant to jump on the lifeline that’s been thrown out to him. Brady squeezes his shoulder.

“Keep the faith, Major. He’ll be nipping at our heels again in no time.”

And alright. What else is there to do but believe?

When Gale sheepishly presses Brady for more detail that night, sat at the table with DeMarco and a deck of cards dealt out between the three of them, it turns out everything isn’t as cut and dry as Brady had made it seem, though Gale can’t blame him for not wanting to crush his spirit.

He keeps his voice low when he asks how they went down, not wanting to disturb the others in their bunks, and his stomach twists with the regretful look Brady gives him when he tells him he’d lost sight of John after they’d jumped.

“We would’ve landed real close to each other with how low we

jumped though, Buck, so unless he managed to weasel himself away before getting caught, he can't be far behind, swear it."

As days pass with no sign of John, it's hard to stay optimistic.

Gale's not even sure what outcome *would* be the optimistic one. Selfishly, he wants John there. He wants his best friend back; it's the longest they've been apart in the three years they've known each other, save for when John flew out to England a few weeks before him in the spring, but at least then they had their duties to make the time pass quickly. He misses being able to merely glance John's way and not having to say a word to communicate his thoughts, and he feels dull without John keeping him on his toes with his honesty, and he craves the grounding feeling of being at his side.

But the better part of him, the part not controlled by his heart, hopes that against all odds, John's managed to escape to the outskirts of town and fall into the hands of the resistance efforts. They'd both get a kick out of that– John getting sent home only six months after finally joining the action because the Air Force can't risk him going down again with confidential information. Maybe he's even back in the States already, thanking his lucky stars and instilling further belief in his lucky deuce as he bites another superstitious corner off.

That's what Gale knows he should wish for, more than anything. And he does.

Every night when he crawls into his bunk, he faces the wall in a bid for privacy as he clasps his hands together and clumsily whispers his way through what he hopes qualifies as a prayer. He doesn't know if it counts, coming from a non–believer, but he thinks about the rosary that hangs around John's neck along with his dog tags and decides that if it doesn't, then God doesn't care all that much anyway.

Another small group of prisoners arrives a few days after Brady's crew, and this time Gale's clinging to the fence before the crowd even properly forms, eyes wide and knuckles white from his grip on the chain link.

"Haven't seen you move that fast since the last bike race," DeMarco jests when he reaches Gale, but Gale knows he's nervous too, gaze not straying from the gates.

As the newcomers filter by, Gale searches every face once, and then

three times over like he can magically make John's easy grin appear if he tries hard enough.

But John isn't there.

He hopes that's a good thing, that he really did make it out of enemy territory, or that he's not stuck in a room pissing off some interrogator. He doesn't let himself think about the other option.

Gale knows he must not be doing a very good job at hiding his worrying as he mopes around the next day, because Brady sits down on the steps next to him outside their block and starts telling him about his and John's last exchange, wholly unprompted.

"We're balancing over miles and miles'a sky in the bomb bay, getting sprayed with flak, and Bucky *refuses* to jump before I do." Brady's relaying the story with such colour and feeling that Gale can imagine he still sees it playing out before his eyes, and he gets it; his own bail out sneaks up on him and loops against the backs of his eyelids like a film some nights.

But Brady's words are light with amusement, the corners of his eyes creasing a bit as he recalls the quite frankly pearl–clutching levels of pride and idiocy the two of them had partaken in.

"He says, 'Let's get off this dump,' and I say 'Go!' Because, y'know, it's my ship, my responsibility," Brady says matter of factly. "But he says– and remember, this is with the sound of shrapnel pelting the sides of the plane, no laughing matter– *'You* go!'"

Gale finds it in himself to be a little bit embarrassed at how he's hanging off of his every word. He feels like a kid being read to after waking up from a nightmare, a blatant effort to get him to calm down, and Brady knows what he's doing, because it's working.

"And then y'know what he does?" Brady lowers his voice conspiratorially, and Gale bites onto his hook without a shred of reservation, shaking his head as he waits.

"The asshole pulls *rank* on me!" Brady says, clearly still in disbelief at John's audaciousness. "Gives me some 'I'm the senior officer' bullshit."

Gale cracks a smile at that, breathing out a laugh, running a hand down his face in secondhand stress.

"Jesus," he groans, aghast at John's antics, yet not surprised in the slightest. Senior ranking or not, and regardless of how much banter the sentiment is masked under, Gale knows there's no way John would ever bail unless he was the last one on the plane. It's the kind of leader he is, just as it's the kind of friend he is; he wouldn't expect anything less, as much as he hates the thought of him putting himself in danger like that.

"So I tell him, 'It's my ship, *you* jump', and…" Brady trails off, looking past Gale, squinting a little at the fenceline. At the same moment, the door swings open behind them, missing Brady's head by an inch, and Crank comes barelling out with a hasty apology when he nearly trips over their legs.

Brady's already pushing himself to his feet, and Gale blindly does the same, turning to follow his gaze and feeling his pulse quicken when he sees movement at the gate. He sprints after Crank without a second thought, tunnel vision on the fence until he's stumbling into it, wrapping his fingers around steel wire in an attempt to steady the tremble of his hands.

He tells himself over and over to take it easy even as he feels his chest soaring with hope. John *has* to be there; he knows it, can feel it in the marrow of his bones. A new intake so soon after Brady's crew's arrival means these men had to be picked up around the same time, so it would make sense for him to be among the lineup this time around.

Tension fills the air as everyone anxiously waits for the group to round the bend, eager to see familiar faces, and then the first person steps into view.

Rows of bedraggled prisoners follow as noise immediately erupts on all sides of the fences, the electric call and answer, but Gale stays silent, eyes darting from stranger to stranger as bodies file past. When he catches sight of a tall head of dark hair at the other end, his heart begins to beat so hard he's certain it would be visible through his jacket if someone were to look hard enough, and he feels like he's choking on the force of it when he hears a voice he knows all too well shouting unintelligably over the noise of the crowd.

Gale can barely breathe when the last rows of the group finally get closer and he sees John properly through the fence, barking out questions about Gale's whereabouts at the top of his lungs, sounding like an interrogator in his persistence. If he wasn't so short on oxygen, he'd laugh, because of course, looking half–dead and more blood and

bruises than skin, John's still asking after *him*.

He watches him make his way down, heart in his throat and unable to get a single word out, seeing John frantically searching for him the same way *he'd* been searching only a day ago. Then John gets near enough that he's able to call over to Crank a few feet away, and Gale finds his voice, cutting his desperate questioning off.

"John Egan, your two o'clock," he gets out, voice gruff as he fights to be heard over all the other noise. But John's head whips his way before the words have even fully left his mouth, and the grin that splits across his battered face looks painful. Gale thinks it's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen.

He can taste rust with how hard he's biting down on the inside of his cheek to fight back tears of relief, a smile spreading across his own face, slotting his hands through the fence as if he expects to be able to reach out and pull John in when he passes.

"What took you so long?" He croaks out when John reaches him, and he sees the same overwhelm in those dark blue eyes that he shares in the center of his chest, rooting itself there and digging its heels in with a fierceness.

John shakes his head, seemingly at a real loss for words for the first time in his life, but the earth–shattering smile never leaves his face, not even when he's eventually forced to turn away from Gale and limp after the group. Only then does Gale's own smile give his cheeks a break, chest clenching with concern as his brain conjures up suffocating thoughts of what might've caused the state he's in.

It's likely less than an hour that he's left waiting at the entrance to their compound, but it feels like the longest wait of his life, not taking his eyes off of the stockade John had gone into for even a second. None of the guys make a jab at him for it, not even jokingly, all of them evidently feeling lighter knowing that both beating halves of the 100th's heart are intact.

When a guard opens the gate and the newcomers begin making their way in, Gale hovers close by, fists clenched in his pockets so he can distract himself with the bite of his nails against his palms, but at long last, there's John, ambling through the fence in a beeline towards him. He's still smiling, though a little more tiredly now, and as Gale opens his arms preemptively, John stumbles forward.

All Gale has to do is close the gap, and then John's sagging against

him, at first with what seems like relief, but when his body suddenly gets a lot heavier, Gale realizes he's run out of strength to keep himself up, as if he'd been holding on until the last possible second. The others swoop in to help, and Gale refuses to let go, keeping an arm around John as he maneuvers himself to his left while DeMarco gets his other side, alleviating John's legs from some of his weight.

It's a struggle to help him up the steps to their block and into their room, but all Gale can focus on is that John's *here* and he's alive and breathing and grunting out a dry "at least take me to dinner first" when Gale directs DeMarco to help him get John into his bunk, more concerned about getting him off his feet than sorting out what bed he'll take. He doesn't care about the mess the blood and dirty clothes are going to make when he's happy enough to hear John crack a stupid joke that it makes his eyes sting.

"We gotta get you to medical, John," Gale murmurs when John grits out a sound of pain as he helps ease him down onto the thin mattress. John shakes his head, then winces at the motion, letting the side of his face sink into the pillow, though he never takes his eyes off of Gale.

"You're in a bad way," Brady chimes in, hovering just behind him, and Gale nods in agreement, pleading with his eyes, hoping John will just concede and go easily.

"Too tired," John mumbles, letting his eyelids droop. "Tomorrow."

Gale steps forward, alarmed by the prospect of him sleeping with a possible head injury.

"You might have a concussion, John," he worries. "It's not safe to sleep till you get checked out."

John cracks an eye open at that.

"Been sleeping every night since it happened, an' I'm still alive, aren't I?" And *oh,* Gale hasn't realized how much he's been missing that snark.

He doesn't bother hiding his fond smile when he tells John, "coulda fooled me, with the state you're in," and he gets a small smile in return before John's eyes slip closed again.

Gale spends the rest of the evening with a chair pulled up to the edge of his bunk, refusing to leave John's side long after everyone else has gone to bed despite offers to take shifts, arms folded against the frame

so he can lean in close and rest his chin against them.

He keeps a watchful eye on John as he sleeps, trailing his gaze over the swollen bridge of his nose and the deep bruising around his eyes, heart feeling heavy. It's nowhere near the only time he's seen John with a shiner, breaking up more than a few pub brawls and fist fights over the years they've known each other, but to see him like this is something else entirely, and it settles over Gale dark and somber. He feels lucky his own injuries are a little more superficial, as painful as they were at first; he wishes he could transfer John's wounds to his own body so he could alleviate his pain for him.

This marred version of John feels like something he isn't meant to witness, too vulnerable and so far from the golden man he knows is beneath all the contusions. He lets himself raise one of his hands, tentatively nudging a dark curl free from the dried blood above one eyebrow and pushing it off of John's forehead, knuckles gently brushing over the almost feverish skin there.

He trails his fingers featherlight down the slope of his jaw, careful to avoid any cuts, imagining that he's healing each one as he passes by it, banishing all the mottled reds and purples with his touch alone. Like King Midas, he muses, turning John golden again.

Gale finds himself dozing off intermittently as the night creeps on, and he knows his back is going to give him hell for it in the morning, but even the empty bunk next to John feels much too far away, so he stays put until he eventually slips into a light sleep.

He's awoken by a jolt of movement at some point, eyes snapping open to find John already blearily looking back at him, temples damp with sweat, nostrils flaring as he tries to catch his breath.

"What's wrong?" Gale asks immediately, sore back going rigid as he straightens, ready to stand and jump into action. But John reaches out, grabbing his wrist to stop him.

"Jus'a bad dream," he slurs out, and Gale relaxes, exhaling shakily, much too used to expecting the worst with the shape he's seen some men come to the camp in.

"Sorry," John says guiltily, pulling his hand away, and Gale shakes his head, leaning back in, pillowing his cheek against his arms.

"Don't be," he murmurs. "I didn't mean to fall asleep."

Gale watches John watch him, not sure whether he's half asleep or lost in thought. The angle is off, almost viewing each other like they're upside down, so he lifts his head and leans his other cheek on his arm instead, mirroring John's position as if they're sharing a pillow. If they were, they'd be close enough that the tips of their noses would nearly touch, but the way Gale rests his weight on the bedframe has him a little bit lower, John's breaths tickling the hairs that curl around the shell of his ear, the feeling reminiscent of the last time they'd slept this close to each other.

Before he can fall back into the spiral of regret, of wishing he'd been braver then, John shifts, inhaling deep.

"Thought you were dead," he whispers after a beat of silence, face twisting slightly. Gale frowns.

"Some dream," he mutters sympathetically, all too familiar with the images John's brain must've been procuring in his sleep, having had his own share of gut–wrenching nightmares filled with loss.

"Not that," John mumbles, brows furrowing. "When you went down."

Gale swallows hard, humming in understanding. That was something he'd spent a lot of time agonizing over in solitary, working himself into fits of panic over the thought that if John believed he was dead, there was real reason to fear him going out and getting himself killed on purpose. He'd talked himself down each time by convincing himself that his POW status would be relayed back to their side, but he hadn't considered that John could get shot down too before any communication could be made.

Even so far apart, they'd both managed to fall into step with the other, always in sync in one way or another.

John's eyelids already look heavy again, so Gale doesn't try to dig into his emotions, smiling tiredly instead.

"Seemed pretty convinced I was still kicking around when you were hollering my name at all the men earlier," he teases softly, and the corners of John's eyes crinkle before they close fully.

"Guess that built in radar for you's worth somethin'," John whispers, and Gale feels his insides crumble, pressing his cheek harder against his arm to keep himself from doing something stupid. He stares with his heart doing somersaults as John's breathing evens out again, the tense set of his forehead easing.

Gale feels a little more whole, a little more steady with every breath John lets out, counting each exhale until his own eyes can't stay open any longer.

Finally, with the other half of his soul home safe, he lets sleep carry him away too.

Chapter End Notes

Two chapters in less than two weeks... I fear digging into Gale's psyche had me in a chokehold for the past week but I'm not mad. :-)

Was really unsure about the last third of this one– I wanted to properly capture the feeling of the reunion, the mix of relief and fear, but I've rewritten it so many times at this point that I'm giving up and just releasing it into the world lol. <3

Rushing this note out because I'm meant to be on my way out the door lol but thank you thank THANK YOU for the love on the last chapter as always. I feel like a broken record but it's because I really do feel so overwhelmed that anyone takes the time to write out their thoughts on my words, it makes me so!!!! Will never comprehend it but I appreciate it so much and your words make my heart flutter and soar. <333

You can find me on my tumblr posting updates for this fic, brainrotting, answering drabble prompts, etc etc if you wanna hang and see where I'm at progress-wise between chapters! We've got a couple AUs being yapped about there that I'm gonna eventually turn into fics if that interests you, and otherwise, I'll see you in the next chapter. :-)

P.S. A little aside– I know in real life, John and Gale actually stayed separated for months (!!! hurts every time I think about it) once John arrived at the Stalag. But because I'm staying mostly timeline compliant (I took liberty with some details in this chapter because I can xoxo) to the way the show portrayed things, I figured it would just be more straightforward to have them reunite the way they did in MOTA. But also, tidbit for those unaware of the actual backstory and wanting to get their feelings hurt: Gale and John were actually both being held in solitary at the same time in the same interrogation camp, and they had no idea they were at times only feet away from each other. Tried to sneak in a little blurb about that and was gonna delve further into

it but I'll save it for another time lol. :')

But You Keep Coming When I Call

Chapter Summary

> “Thanks doc,” John smiles, relaxed as if Gale hasn’t just had to wipe remnants of a war zone off his face, and Gale is struck with a sharp ache for their cozy barracks back in England, the naivety of the spring, baseball games and skinned elbows.
>
> “Always,” Gale says. He hopes John hears the promise in it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When the morning rolls around, Gale wakes up with the same heaviness in his chest that he’s gotten used to– until he opens his eyes and sees John. As his brain catches up to the previous day’s events, the weight dissipates, replaced with a bloom of warmth.

He’s got a crick in his neck and a spine that’s screaming at him for the hours spent hunched over, but he’s woken up face to face with a man he’d half–convinced himself he might never see again, and that would be enough to dull the impact from a hundred–odd rounds off a turret in that moment, as far as he’s concerned.

Brady’s getting dressed to his right, and he breathes out a laugh at the content smile that slips onto Gale’s face as he reaches his arms above his head to stretch out his cramped back.

“You’d think it’s your birthday, Major,” he comments, but when Gale turns to sheepishly look at him, Brady’s wearing an easy smile too, clearly feeling a bit better with John’s arrival, the balance of things a little less off–kilter.

“Good as,” Gale mumbles, twisting from one side to the other in his chair and wincing as his lower back pops quietly.

The others start to wake too as the sun creeps in through the windows, sliding out of their bunks and dressing for the day, and Gale’s grateful for the obvious effort they make to keep it down for John’s sake, though he’s pretty sure it would take a bomb dropping in the center of the compound to wake him up right now.

DeMarco asks if he wants him to bring breakfast back for them, but

Gale tells him that he's gonna try to convince John to head over to medical first, so he filters out along with the others, and then it's just him and John left, the room falling silent save for the footsteps in the hall and distant voices in the yard.

Gale feels bad waking John when he needs the rest, but he figures it'll be better to get to medical while it's still early and hopefully not so busy. He can't help but glance at the doorway before letting himself lean over John's bunk, running a hand through his hair in an effort to pull him out of his deep sleep gently, murmuring his name until he stirs at the disturbance.

Any guilt Gale feels for waking him is obliterated in an instant by the sleepy smile he gets when John cracks his eyes open and sees him, making a quiet noise of greeting into his pillow. Gale knows there's no need to keep messing with his hair, but he hopes the way it makes John go all soft will ease the blow when he tries to talk him into taking a walk to the sick quarters. Either it works, or John's just feeling too poorly to argue that much, because he agrees– though only after Gale promises him half a dozen times that he's not going to leave him for even a second, as if he'd ever planned on doing so.

Gale sticks to his word, arm firm around John's middle as he helps him limp through the compound to the medical building, and he gives the POW doctor a stern look when the man suggests he wait outside so as to not be around the other sick patients. He gets a "suit yourself" in return, the doctor likely understanding the reluctance all of them have to leave their friends' sides in a place like this, but Gale almost wishes for a moment that he had heeded his advice and stayed outside when John's shirt is lifted over his head to reveal a spattering of saturated colours to match the ones on his face.

His own ribs ache in sympathy, unable to tear his eyes away from the angry reds and purples of the bruised skin that Gale remembers so recently being summer–tanned and adorned with freckles, rather than marred with evidence of hatred and malice. He wants to flatten his palms over John's ribcage and feel his heart beating beneath it to settle his own, but instead he shoves his hands in his pockets to hide the tremble of them as he watches the doctor poke and prod at all of John's injuries.

With how undersupplied the camp is, it's unsurprising when the doctor concludes with the rough diagnosis of "fractured orbital socket, maybe ribs too; ankle might be sprained, and a concussion isn't unlikely, but there's not much we can do about any of it aside from

bedrest." It's about as much as Gale had expected, but he feels reassured having a doctor confirm it, even though the man seems just as frustrated at the lack of resources keeping him from actually doing anything to help his patients.

John complains and cracks jokes on the walk back, but Gale can tell the excursion has taken a lot out of him regardless of how he tries to cover it with dry humour, half his body weight leaning on Gale by the time they make it back to their block. He's in no state to keep himself upright in a shower, so Gale bookmarks that for another day.

"You got it done with, John, you did good," he says softly as he helps John back into his bunk, still paying no mind to the empty one next to it.

"Was more fun when you were the one patching me up," John grumbles as he lays down, and Gale smiles, stepping over to a cabinet once he's settled.

"I'm sure we can work something out," he says, pulling a rag out. "Don't got hot water right now, but let's get the blood off your face."

"You gonna do it for me?" John asks, watching him move around the room to pour some water from a jug into a bowl.

"Course," Gale answers, as if there was never any question about it. He pulls the chair back up to the side of the bed, sitting down and settling the bowl on the bottom bunk, wetting the cloth. John shuffles to the edge of the mattress so he doesn't have to lean as much, and Gale carefully brings his free hand up to cup John's face, gently tilting his head so he can start with the areas furthest from the actual wounds.

"You got a license to operate that thing?" John mumbles as he slowly drags the cloth along his jaw, and Gale's mouth twitches, an exhale of air escaping from his nose.

"Gonna need to get myself one, if you keep getting yourself banged up like this," Gale says quietly. He doesn't ask what happened, not wanting to push John into talking about it when he's drained as is, but it's pretty obvious his injuries didn't occur in the sky, both because Gale knows flak–damage when he sees it, and because John's injuries are far too recent to have been acquired the day his fort went down.

"Shoulda seen the other guy," John says, wincing at the same time when Gale dabs at the gash over his eyebrow. Gale hums as if his

comment is the slightest bit believable, pushing John's hair away from his temple as he cleans up the crusted blood that's matted itself there too, and they lapse into silence. John's eyes never leave his face, and when he blinks it's slow and measured, and he's unusually pliant and docile as Gale guides his head to the side.

He feels John's hand come out to grab at his shirt when he gets near his bad eye, and Gale pauses, making a sympathetic noise.

"Sorry, Johnny," Gale murmurs, leaning closer and bracing his elbow on the bed to steady his hand, hesitantly resuming his motions. "That alright?"

John nods, and Gale feels his persistent gaze until he gets close enough to his eyes with the rag that John has to close them, hissing quietly at the brush of cloth over the deep bruising, fist tightening in his shirt.

"Doing good," Gale whispers, so focused on keeping his touch soft that he barely breathes. He feels the tightness in his chest loosen a bit with each rinse of the rag; it does nothing to rid John of the contusions or swelling, but freeing him of the dried crimson that further conceals his handsome face makes him feel more like his John– the one whose face he's been seeing every time he's closed his eyes since his plane fell out of the sky.

The sound of the door handle turning makes both of them jump, and John's hand retracts from his shirt at the same moment that Gale leans back abruptly like he's been caught doing something he shouldn't be, turning as DeMarco enters the room. His eyes drop to the bloody rag in Gale's hand as he heads to the bunks, and he raises his eyebrows.

"Special treatment, Bucky?" DeMarco teases, pulling himself up into his top bunk, above and to the right of Gale's. "He didn't clean up *my* blood when we got here."

Gale scoffs, turning back to John, continuing to gently dab at his face.

"I don't remember you cleaning up mine either," Gale murmurs in a lighthearted retort, and DeMarco makes a noncommittal noise, blankets shifting.

He watches John's gaze zero back in on his face, blinking like he's trying to get his eyes to work right, then squinting. Gale's not surprised that his vision might be a little messed up right now, all things considered, but he *is* surprised when John carefully reaches up,

tracing a finger over the paling, raised scar on his cheek.

Gale's movements pause as glances up at DeMarco's bunk apprehensively, only returning his attention to John when he finds they're mostly obscured at this angle, heart still pattering nervously. John appears entirely unconcerned by the company, instead visibly bristling as he becomes aware of Gale's injuries, jaw setting like it's put a bitter taste in his mouth.

"Just flak, John," Gale murmurs, and John's hand slides from one side of his jaw to the other, pad of his thumb dragging over the healing laceration there too.

"And–"

"–flak, or something else when I was going down, not sure," Gale answers his question before he can finish it, and his response seems to have a soothing affect on John, though he still looks reluctant when he pulls his hand away.

"Was there– was everything else okay?" John asks, almost seeming guilty, as if Gale would ever fault him for being preoccupied with the world of pain he must be in.

"Not sure you're in any condition to be worrying about anyone else," Gale looks at him pointedly, nipping that line of thinking in the bud. "I'm fine. I got lucky."

He doesn't tell John about the hit he took to the back of his skull from the farmer's gun, because he doesn't want him stressing about anything other than healing up, and he knows John will freak himself out every time Gale goes to sleep if he finds out he's had any sort of head injury. They can swap bail out stories another day, and Gale will pretend that he hasn't already learned of half of John's from Brady in the man's attempt to talk him out of a nervous breakdown.

John's eyelids flutter closed when Gale moves to dabbing at the deep cut over the bridge of his nose, and Gale's heart twists at how fully trusting and vulnerable he looks like this, breathing evenly save for the sharp intake of breath when Gale has to press the rag down a little harder over a more stubborn patch of blood.

When Gale finally leans back and stretches, letting out a heavy exhale, John opens his eyes again, watching him as he drops the rag into the pink–tinged water for the last time and sets the bowl aside on the floor.

“Thanks doc,” John smiles, relaxed as if Gale hasn’t just had to wipe remnants of a war zone off his face, and Gale is struck with a sharp ache for their cozy barracks back in England, the naivety of the spring, baseball games and skinned elbows.

“Always,” Gale says. He hopes John hears the promise in it.

It takes a few days, but as John’s body builds up enough energy to expend on things other than healing, he graduates from little bites of food here and there to full meals with Gale’s coaxing. The moment John sits up on his own and asks to be shown where the showers are fills Gale with a feeling of relief only second to the one he’d felt seeing John through the fence earlier that week, and he’d never have thought he’d be so happy to awkwardly hover with his back to a showering John to ensure he doesn’t fall and crack his head open with how dizzy he still gets while standing.

A week or so in, they both seem to fall into some semblance of a routine, giving their days what structure they can, a habit born from years of duty. Gale feels strange, not being in a constant state of worry after so much time spent feeling like he was drowning in it. Things aren’t *good,* by any means, but the men in their compound are treated well enough because of their significant ranks, so he doesn’t have to live every day in fight or flight anymore.

John, however, doesn’t seem to have registered this.

He’s more or less back to his regular self, residual bruising and pain aside, but Gale has noticed he’s almost skittish, quick to jump at sudden noises, a little more reactive than usual, and not in the typical loud and proud John way.

The worst thing though is that John’s even jumpy around *him.* Gale has this nauseating discovery when he lurches forward past John to catch a glass that’s about to get knocked off the table while they’re all sat around eating dinner one evening, and John flinches like he expects Gale to hit him, almost dropping his spoon. Gale looks at him with concern, but John plays it off with an apology and some quip about how he’d been thinking Gale was finally losing it with cabin fever, and no one else seems to question it.

But Gale hates that something’s got John like this. He attributes the kicked–dog behaviour to whatever must have happened in the few weeks they were separated, and he wants to ask about it so badly;

Gale does hint at it a couple times, but he never gets much out of John, other than assurances that he hadn't mouthed off to a guard or done something stupid to get beat.

Gale has heard a few of the others ask him too in passing conversation, and he's pretty sure he's heard John give each of them a different answer each time, so he takes that as John not wanting to talk about it, which only makes him want to know more. It frustrates Gale, not being able to help, seeing John bottle it up. Instead of pressing for answers though, he just makes sure to stick close to him, taking care to be more intentional in his movements, learning to read this new side of John's body language so he can at least take guesses at what he might need. Anything to feel useful, to feel like he's able to help, to give him any sense of purpose.

Lack of purpose is what Gale quickly begins to realize will pick each of them off one by one if they're not careful. They may physically see their enemies each day, lining the fences or watching from their towers or strong–arming the less fortunate men for kicks, but boredom is the quiet killer, the adversary none of them could have foreseen or prepared for.

Gale copes with this by drawing upon skills from long summers spent passing time as a kid, setting his sights on trying to accomplish what feels like the near–impossible task of putting together a functioning radio from nothing. At first it's ideal– John's still healing up, so needing to stay hunched over the table in the privacy of their room gives Gale a good excuse to hang around him, instead of leaving him by himself to go socialize or partake in the more physical chores out in the yard.

Once John starts feeling well enough to move around though, Gale's productivity is brought to a grinding halt. He's happy to drop everything to accompany John on walks around the yard whenever he asks, but there's only so much entertainment one can glean from lapping an unchanging landscape over and over again. It doesn't take long for Gale to figure out that John's really not going to do well with the monotony of their new lives.

Granted, it's not surprising that the man who had preferred to be in the air risking his neck every day rather than sitting safe behind the promotion of a desk job would have a harder time than most dealing with boredom. Back at base, there were endless things Gale could think up to keep him occupied, but here, with very few available resources, it's more of a challenge. There are little chores he and the

others task John with that don't require too much physical exertion, but that doesn't pass all that much time, so something they begin to make plenty of use out of is the library in their compound.

Most evenings after dinner Gale finds himself reading to John, whose vision is still recovering slowly. It's Gale's favourite part of the day, getting to see what John's tale of choice is each time he returns to their room with a new book in hand and meekly asks him to read it out loud, as if Gale isn't waiting to do just that from the moment John slips out of their block each time. John only ever picks informational books though, jumping around from one subject to another, seemingly drawn to nonfiction for the first time in his life.

Half of Gale suspects it's because he likes getting to ask "why" and probe his brain, but the other half of him thinks John's trying to pick books he thinks *Gale* would like; it makes his heart feel too big for his chest either way.

Sometimes, if John chooses a book that has images, they lie on their stomachs in their respective bunks, and Gale balances the book on the board between their mattresses so John can look at the diagrams and pictures too. Gale feels like a kid on those evenings, propped up on his elbows in the dim lamplight, the act reminiscent of childhood sleepovers, friends taking turns reading each other scary stories by the light of a torch.

Most of the time though, they lie on their backs and place their pillows on either side of the board between them, lying head–to–head so that Gale can keep his voice low to avoid disturbing the others. He likes these nights best, because it's the only time they get to lie close like that. All of the other men immediately take to positioning themselves with their pillows on the far ends of their bunks, the board between their mattresses separating their feet instead, and neither Gale or John dare to do otherwise, but when they're reading quietly, it's a reasonable exception, one no one will question.

John falls asleep like that one night, dozes right off in the middle of questioning Gale about something he's fairly certain John doesn't actually have any interest in. Gale closes the book and sets it on his shelf, ready to grab his pillow and move it to the other side of his bunk, but he hesitates. He doesn't want to wake John up with his shuffling when he already has a hard time getting enough rest as is, and really, he doesn't think anyone will give them shit for unintentionally falling asleep like that, so he stays the way he is, letting himself be lulled to sleep by the steady in and out of John's

breathing.

That same night though, Gale's pulled back out of sleep by jerky movements and muffled noises inches away from his head, and he rolls onto his side, disoriented as he squints in the dark. John looks like he's asleep, eyes closed and showing no signs of being aware of Gale's watchful gaze, but his brows are pinched together and it sounds like he's trying to speak through his closed lips, shoulders hunching up towards his ears and then relaxing sporadically.

In Gale's half–asleep state, he concludes that John must be in the throes of some sort of night terror, having witnessed it with the others a good few times, and his heart clenches. He takes a precursory glance around the room, assuring himself that all of the others are asleep, or at least working towards it, and then he timidly slips his hand through the space beneath the headboard, winding dark curls around his fingers.

He gently drags his blunt nails over John's scalp in rhythmic petting motions, hushing him softly, running his fingers through his hair. It feels like a desperate, futile attempt to love away the bad, to push out the dark with a touch as sweet as the dream is mean, but it seems to do something, because John quiets after a minute, the tense set of his face slowly relaxing.

Gale feels his own breathing return to normal when John's begins to as well, and he watches him for a bit longer to be sure that he's alright, but he's reluctant to retract his hand and possibly nudge him awake. So he maneuvers himself carefully onto his back again, keeping his arm outstretched above his head, wedged between the board and mattresses with a hand full of curls, and that's how he falls asleep.

At some point, he's woken up by the sensation of soft hair slipping from his palm when, he assumes, John turns over to assess the situation, and Gale pulls his arm back into his own bunk without a word, keeping his eyes closed as though he's done it in his sleep. Neither of them mention it in the morning.

"Shit," Gale murmurs, and he hears John shift in his bed. Despite them long ago sorting out the bunk arrangements, Gale still finds John in his own half the time, staring longingly out the window at the men who are in good enough shape to be doing physical work. He doesn't

mind; he'd rather John get some natural light if he's going to keep stubbornly cooping himself up in their block rather than sitting out in the waning sun while Gale works.

"What's wrong?" John asks, and Gale sets down his makeshift tools with a heavy sigh, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

"This rig's no good," he says. John rolls out of bed and appears at his side in an instant, leaning his palms on the table, visibly perked up as he stares down at the mess of coil and pins.

"Can I help?" He asks, leaning into Gale's space.

"Yeah, if you can find a better tool than a jagged fork," Gale says. It's meant to be sarcastic, because he's pretty certain he's exhausted all of his options, but John straightens, and his eyes are brighter than they've been in days when Gale looks up at him.

"Okay," John nods, and Gale furrows his brows.

"John, I wasn't being serious," he says gently, but John shrugs.

"Maybe I can sniff out something you haven't. Fresh eyes, and all." And well, Gale's not going to discourage him, not when there's finally a pep in his step as he walks out of the room with all the determination of flight–school–Bucky, the one who would take "bet you can't" and "it's not possible" as a personal challenge.

Gale can't hide his surprise when John returns an hour and some change later and drops the jankiest shears Gale's ever seen in his life on the table, clearly constructed inside these fences, but shears nonetheless. He picks them up, testing that they open and close properly, examining the blades and finding they're not nearly as dull as he'd dreaded, more than pointed enough to do the trick. Then he looks up at a round–eyed John, who's barely containing the buzz of his anticipation as he awaits Gale's verdict.

"How?" Gale asks, both confused and thrilled.

"I remembered Crank telling me about some guys who've been prepping to get some sorta garden going come spring," John scratches his arm uncomfortably, making no effort to hide his displeasure at the thought of planning so far ahead, of accepting their situation like that.

“I figured, what with them not being able to start anything outside till then, they’ve gotta be working on something else for it, so I tracked ‘em down, and sure enough,” John gestures to the shears. “Made a trade with the promise that I’d return it when they ask.”

“You’re a damn bloodhound, John,” Gale says, and John beams, pleased with himself.

“You gonna try ‘em?” He asks keenly.

“I am,” Gale affirms, pushing aside the length of coil he’s made a mess of experimenting with while waiting.

“Can I watch?”

Gale nods, breathing out a laugh when John diligently sits himself down in the chair to his left.

“Might take a bit,” he warns him.

“I’ve got all day,” John says dryly, bracing his elbows on the table and leaning his face in his hands, cheeks squishing together.

To John’s credit, he does display an unusual amount of patience while Gale works away at carefully splitting the scrap wire, counting the turns around the wood base and twisting loops into it as he goes. When it comes time to test it, John lifts his head from where he’d slumped over to rest it on his folded arms, eyes glued to Gale’s face for any sign of a reaction.

For the first time in days, Gale picks up on the faintest electric crackle through his makeshift earphone as he fidgets with the coil, and John leans in impatiently when he raises his eyebrows.

“Anything?” He whispers, and Gale lifts the earpiece to John’s ear in response, watching his face light up.

“Good?” John asks when he sets it down, eyes hopeful, and Gale smiles.

“It’s great,” he says sincerely. “Good job, John.”

John looks about ready to fly out of his chair with the approval, livelier than Gale’s seen him since the day he arrived, and it has warmth seeping outward from behind his sternum, makes him want to chase the feeling.

“Best output I’ve gotten so far,” Gale goes on. “It’s a good start.”

“What’s next?”

Gale feels like it should’ve been obvious that this would be the perfect thing to keep John busy with– compared to the bleakness of everything else, these retrieval missions are an adventure, some sort of variety and purpose as the days drag on. John comes up with practical solutions that don’t even occur to Gale when he’s lost in his small–picture, analytical state of mind amidst coil and razors, and pairing that with the way John seems to thrive off of Gale’s praise and approval just as much as he seems to gain satisfaction from completing the tasks thrown his way, this arrangement works out almost perfectly for both of them.

The only apparent downside is that with John constantly on his scavenger hunts, networking and tracking things down with his nose to the ground, they aren’t spending as much time together during the day. It’s fine for a while– Gale’s being kept busy through keeping John busy, so he doesn’t pay much mind to that particular shift in their dynamic.

He *does* feel somewhat isolated despite constant interactions with the other men, but he’s only able to pinpoint why that is when he sees it through John first after about a week of this new routine.

It’s probably imperceivable to anyone else, but Gale notices when John starts hanging just a little bit closer when they’re talking, or when he’s watching Gale work; he’s touchier too, the way he used to be back on base, albeit without the excuse of intoxication now. He’s just as eager to go scouting for Gale, but twice as eager to stick around after each success, always appearing expectant of something other than the praise Gale– admittedly heavily– showers him with.

Gale doesn’t know whether he should comment on any of this or not, back to his old ways of freezing in his indecision, trapping himself in the cycle of feeling in over his head but doing nothing to alleviate his internal conflict. It had been easy to swear to himself he’d do things differently if given a second chance when he was moments away from throwing himself out the hatch of a burning plane– he’s been in this war long enough to know men make a lot of empty promises and say a lot of foolish things when faced with death. He doesn’t want to be one of them, and yet he stays quiet, boxed in by his own fears.

Gale's forced out of his self–made trap a few nights later when he crawls into bed and lays his head down on his pillow and discovers that it smells distinctly of someone other than himself. He discreetly turns his head and breathes in again, and he has to shut it eyes with the way it feels like someone's just shaken his brain in his skull.

This isn't a faint 'John has been lying in his bed again' smell– he's immediately struck with the certainty that this is John's pillow. It's definitely not his own, and as much as it makes his face heat up to admit it to himself, he wouldn't recognize any of the others' scents like he does John's, not after so many years of close quarters with him, not after the arms thrown over shoulders and bodies squished side by side in pub booths and legs overlapping in the backs of cars.

This is John's pillow, and it's in his bed, and Gale has no idea why– except he kind of does, but he's not sure what it means.

He's thankful for the dark of night as he lies there, half on his stomach with his face pressed to the pillow, brain gone to mush and cheeks warm enough that he knows there would be a visible pink to them if someone were to turn on a light. He's caught so off guard by whatever he's just unearthed, bowled over by confusion and the quickening of his pulse and heat beneath his navel, but all he can do is lie there with his face burning an impression into the pillow as he begs for sleep to come quick.

Maybe it's a copout, but when Gale wakes up the next morning after a night of tossing and turning, he comes to the conclusion that while he doesn't know what this means, it's John's doing, so it's on him to talk first.

What Gale *does* know is that he can't survive another night like that without losing his restraint and whatever semblance of sanity he has left in this hellscape, so the moment he's alone in their room he swaps their pillows back, shoving down any feelings of mourning over the decision and getting on with his day. John doesn't seem to be acting any different, and he's not sure if that's better or worse, but he busies himself so he doesn't have to waste time wondering.

Everything is fine enough until Gale collapses into bed that night, so exhausted that his eyes droop closed the moment his head hits the pillow– but as soon as he inhales, he knows. It's like someone's strung

a livewire through his veins, sparking up at random with each breath in, some sort of instinctive reaction to the onslaught of feelings he's stuck turning over in his head while he waits for sleep.

It shouldn't affect him so heavily, shouldn't affect him at all, actually, but it eats away at his brain both with curiosity and with something less innocent, something he might give more thought to if he was in a room on his own. If Gale was less accustomed to John's ways, he might assume this is intentional, some strange attempt to mess with him out of boredom, but he's almost positive this is a new ritual John's constructed that probably makes perfect sense in his peculiar mind.

Gale wakes at the same time as everyone else the next day, but before John, as seems to have become the new normal, so he stays put, facing the wall with his eyes closed as he listens to each man shuffle out of the room one by one. When he hears the door swing shut for the last time, he pushes himself up and out of bed, not really sure what he's aiming to do but tired of mentally talking himself in circles.

He wants to be mad, but he knows he's not really; he's just confused and feeling uncharacteristically impulsive– he wonders distantly if this is how John lives his life feeling– and too antsy to wait for John to tell on himself like he always does. So he grabs his– John's– pillow and steps over to John's bunk, and then he stops, tension melting away at the sight of wild curls falling over a face so peaceful in sleep.

A face that's half–buried in his own pillow.

As much as Gale thinks he could happily spend the day letting his eyes trace paths over John's blissful expression, so different from the troubled one he often wears in consciousness, he has questions and limited time. He leans against John's bedframe, pillow out of sight at his side, and then he murmurs John's name, squeezing his shoulder gently.

He feels bad every time he does this, but he's pretty sure John would sleep until well past noon in here without the mandatory duties on base to drag him from bed at sunrise, and wakeup duty has automatically fallen on him since John's arrival. It's healthy to keep up with good habits in a place like this anyway, too easy to fall into a slump if left unchecked.

John stirs at a second call of his name, groaning quietly and hiding

further in his pillow, broad shoulders flexing beneath his shirt as he reflexively drags it closer to himself. Gale gives him time to wake up, smiling a little when John finally peels his eyes open, looking blearily up at him. No matter how many times this routine plays out, John still looks at him like he's not even sure what planet he's on every time he wakes him up, and Gale does his best to hide his amusement, not wanting to jar him awake with laughter and get stuck dealing with his grouching all morning.

"Wha'time is it?" John asks, like it has any baring in their current settings. Gale pretends to look at his watch.

"Get–up–o'clock," he announces, and John glares, but there's no kick to it with his sleep–softened features.

"I think you left something in my bunk," Gale says casually, not wanting to make him feel defensive, lifting his pillow into view now that John's able to keep his eyes open.

John blinks at it for a second, brain sluggishly working to catch up, and Gale waits patiently. He half–expects John to just going to laugh this off and make him question whether *he's* the strange one for thinking about it as much as he has been, but the opposite happens– John looks sheepish, like he's just been caught out.

"What's with that?" Gale softens, lowering his hand. John averts his eyes, guilty like an unruly dog that's just been questioned on the contents of its mouth, but Gale keeps his expression gentle, easy so as to not startle him into closing up.

John pushes his face fully into the pillow and mumbles something to the tune of *"s'home,"* and Gale's not sure if he's mistaking the pink tinge to his cheeks, but he's not too convinced his own don't match.

He breathes out a quiet laugh and hums questioningly, placing his palm on the back of John's neck and squeezing gently, coaxing his face out from the pillow.

"You smell like home," John murmurs, eyes stubbornly shut, and Gale's glad he's leaning against the bunk because his legs suddenly feel awfully weak.

"That so?" Gale gets out, mouth dry, letting his hand move to rest between John's shoulder blades. He feels him shrugs tentatively, blankets rustling with the movement.

He wants to tell John that he just put all his confusion from the past few days into words, that he understands, that John *is* like home, but it all seems too tender for where they are.

He feels like a coward, unable to reach out and accept the olive branch that John is so boldly extending to him.

“You miss me when you’re out playing golden retriever?” Gale asks instead, keeping his tone light, not wanting John to feel like he’s being laughed at. Gale’s doing anything but laughing– he feels so endeared by the unexpected admission that his stomach is sick–sweet with it.

He’s certain John’s blushing now, and he’s seconds away from needing to take a seat, not even sure what to do with this reaction, scaring himself with how much he craves *more.*

“You could’ve just asked, John,” he says sincerely before he says something else that he shouldn’t, and John scoffs.

“Yeah?” He mumbles, voice rough with sleep but combative all the same. *“‘Hey Buck, I know we’re cooped up in the same tiny box as each other every day but I miss you, you mind if we swap pillows?’* I’m sure that woulda gone over well.”

Gale makes a quiet noise in the back of his throat, hand flexing on John’s back, understanding how big of an ask of vulnerability that would be, realizing that regardless of John’s blunt tendencies, it’s not a realistic thing to expect from him.

“I wouldn’t’ve minded,” he says honestly, pushing himself to give what he can, idly running the tip of his pointer finger over the bump at the top of John’s spine. John takes a deep breath, but he stays silent.

“You can always ask,” Gale reluctantly steps away from the bunk then, heading for the door to give him some space. “For what it’s worth, I’ve been missing you too.”

By mid–November, some of the guys are starting to pair off into their cramped bunks at night, too cold to fuss over personal space and distasteful implications. Reservations quickly become insignificant when health and comfort are at stake, and no one dares to tease each other about it; despite the inevitable bickering and ribbing that goes on with everyone being in each other’s faces all the time, it seems

unspoken that things like this are off–limits.

Gale doesn't miss the way John eyes him when everyone's turning in for bed, and while he doesn't do anything to encourage him to initiate buddying up, he doesn't do anything to discourage him, either. He's not sure what he wants at this point, barely able to even handle the *thought* of lying so close to John, heart almost beating right out of his chest when he closes his eyes late at night and tries to picture it, and the way it heats his face up succeeds in convincing him that he's not yet cold enough to seriously consider it.

Within a few nights though, they're the only two who haven't paired off, and Gale's worries start to lean in the other direction now, anxious it's going to be more suspicious if they *don't* give into the cold like everyone else. It makes him dread the night, both for the uncertainty of it and for the bone–numbing chill that creeps in harsher each day.

Gale isn't entirely surprised when, shivering himself half to death trying to sleep the next night, he finally hears John slip quietly out of his bunk, and a few seconds later there's a gentle nudge at his back. He rolls over, pressing his lips together to stop the chattering of his teeth, and finds John standing there, blanket in hand, looking equal parts determined and shy.

"Move over," he whispers, holding the blanket up. "I brought you a gift."

Gale breathes out a sigh, blinking at him for a second longer before he resigns himself to his fate, so cold that he wouldn't fight it even if he had a perfectly reasonable excuse to. He rolls back over, shuffling as close to the wall as he can get, and the mattress dips behind him as John climbs up into his bunk, laying his blanket out on top of Gale's. The little bit of heat Gale had accumulated in his cocoon slips out when John lifts the layers to crawl under, mumbling an apology when Gale tenses at the cold air that bites right through his shirt, realizing it might not be long before they need to start wearing their coats to bed.

The thin mattress is as small as John is broad, and as soon as John lays down, there are more points of contact between their bodies than Gale's ever had with another man, than he's ever allowed himself to *think* of having with another man, until recently. It feels wrong, but not in a tangible way– he wonders if it only feels wrong because he knows it's supposed to, because feeling shame over it is the expected reaction. He wonders if any of the others mull these things over.

He wonders too if John's heart is beating as hard as his own is, or if he's laid like this with other men, with Curt. He wishes he could turn over and press his palm to John's forehead and read his thoughts, even though he knows John would readily answer if Gale were to just ask. He won't ask.

The bunk is too short to stretch his legs out as is, and squished so close to the wall now, his knees dig uncomfortably into the wood. John shifts around behind him, evidently trying to find a bearable position that'll allow sleep, but Gale can't bring himself to do the same, and if not for his incessant shivering he'd stay completely still, scared to move and brush against John.

John lets out a little huff of frustration when his maneuvering proves fruitless, and Gale almost laughs, but then a solid wall of heat presses up against his back, an arm slinging heavy over his middle, and his breath catches in his throat. He supposes he should've expected this; it's the most logical move both for comfort and warmth, but that doesn't stop the marathon his heart decides to take off on.

"S'okay?" John whispers, sounding nervous, and Gale nods through the alarm bells echoing in his head, trying to relax the tension in his body. He doesn't feel okay, the tremors running through him now spurred on by the proximity as much as the actual cold– but at the same time, it feels really *nice.* Nicer still when John takes his confirmation and runs with it, pressing his face against the back of Gale's neck, his hot breath fanning out over his skin like an apology for the brush of his cold nose–tip.

Gale can hardly breathe, and he doesn't know where to put his hands or how he's meant to calm himself enough to sleep, and he thinks he's going to have the feeling of the outline of John's stovetop–heated body against his permanently etched into his brain for the rest of his life.

He also understands now why the others usually lay down facing each other; he'd thought it was strange when sleeping front to back seems so much more impersonal somehow, but he's finding it's really not ideal for whoever ends up wedged between a body and the wall, especially when said body is built like a brick–house.

Gale waits for a few minutes before coming to the conclusion that if he wants to get any sleep, he's going to have to bite the bullet and move, and he knows he's going to be buzzing out of his skin regardless of how he's laying, so he figures he may as well do it while

comfortable.

“John,” he whispers, moving his hand down to grab John’s wrist so he can lift his arm up, but as soon as his fingers close around bare skin, there’s a sharp inhale next to his ear.

“Jesus Christ,” John hisses, yanking his arm away like he’s been burnt, except Gale’s quite aware it’s the opposite. “You stick your hands out the window before I crawled up here?”

“Sorry,” Gale says, hushed, tucking his hands close to his chest. “I wanna turn over, ‘m too cramped against the wall.”

John shifts away, and Gale hastily rolls over, immediately humbled by the chill that the gap between them lets in, and by the heat that rises to his cheeks in contrast with the rest of his frigid body when he comes face to face with John. He’s grateful not for the first time for the way the dark hides the rosiness he’s sure is currently painting his cheeks as he tries to navigate this new position, though John isn’t helping matters with the way he’s staring, but then two warm hands grab his own and pull them from the steadily–warming space beneath the blankets.

He tries to tug them back under, shooting John a glare, but John holds him in place.

“Relax,” he whispers, cupping Gale’s hands between his. “Don’t want iceblocks up against my skin while I’m tryin’a sleep.”

John brings their joined hands close to his face, folding his tight around Gale’s until there’s only a little hollow space left, and then he leans in, blowing heat against Gale’s palms.

It’s Gale’s turn to stare now, rooted in place like a deer caught in headlights, watching John’s brows furrow in concentration, cheeks puffing out as he works to coax warmth back into Gale’s numb hands. It helps more than the flush that’s creeping steadily along every inch of his skin does, some sort of trapped noise wanting to crawl up out of his throat, but he swallows it down and closes his eyes instead, a steadiness in his pulse taking the place of the erratic beat from before.

John keeps up his efforts until he apparently decides the temperature is sufficient, and Gale lets himself pretend the brush of his lips that he feels against his hands when John pulls back a bit is accidental for his sanity’s sake.

“Good?” John’s breath ghosts over his palms, and Gale nods without opening his eyes, barely keeping it together as is– though what *it* is, he’s not sure. John seems satisfied with his approval, guiding both of their hands back under the blankets before letting go, and Gale feels him hover, hesitant now.

He takes an uneven breath and decides to be brave for once in his life; he owes John that much, after everything.

He lifts his hand and hopes John can’t feel how he shakes when he places it on his waist, sliding along over skin–heated fabric until he’s able to curl his arm around John’s middle, flattening his hand firmly against his back to prevent himself from shying away.

For a brief moment, keeping himself in place feels like pulling teeth, like he’s actively going against everything he’s been hardwired to be and to believe in, and the effort it takes makes him feel weak, scared of something like this after all he’s seen and done.

And then John’s arm wraps around him, mirroring his own and tugging him closer, and for the first time in as long as he can remember, Gale feels *safe.*

He lets himself be shifted around, bending his legs so his knees interlock with John’s when he’s pulled low enough for John to tuck his chin on top of his head. Gale instinctively turns his face to the side, pressing his cheek to a feverishly–warm chest, feeling fingers splay out between his shoulder blades.

As soon as they both fall still, Gale picks up on a quiet *ba–dum, ba–dum* against his ear, as rapid as his own pulse had been when John first climbed into bed behind him, and he wants to smile as much as he aches to cry, eyes stinging more than he’d like to admit.

I know, he wants to whisper, *me too.* But he’s afraid that if one of them speaks, it’s going to shatter the delicate balance they’ve formed, so he stays silent, listening to the beat of John’s heart slow as his eyes grow heavy.

Gale doesn’t think about how he’s being held the way he as a man should be holding a woman, and he doesn’t think about how it might be nice if there’s another life where he is one, where he doesn’t need to have the threat of a cold death nipping at his heels to be close to a man like this.

He thinks he’d take a hundred years of winter if it meant he could

have this over and over again.

Chapter End Notes

Hello hello!! Ahhh this always feels like coming home. <3 A bit of a longer wait since the last chapter, my apologies! Got carried away with my other BuckBucky fic I impulsively started lol so now I'm trying to balance writing two chaptered fics, but I'm having the time of my life, and my chapter wordcounts (unintentionally) keep steadily getting longer, so I hope it makes the wait a little more worth it. :-)

I only managed to fit in half of what I originally planned to include in this chapter before I had to admit defeat and save it for the next one, so there's a 90% chance that chapter count is gonna jump from 8 to 10 soon lol, whoops. But I can assure you that the next chapter will have The Italicized Oh moment (or something of the sort– feelings, touching, /hopefully/ filth, etc) because it was meant to be in this one but this chapter would've literally ended up being 15k. :')

Thank you soooo very much for the kind comments on the last chapter as usual; I literally sit here smiling like an idiot reading them every time, it brings me so much joy to read your thoughts, it feels like a warm hug and I hope this chapter feels like one in return for you!! <33

As always, I'm hanging out over on my tumblr, cooking up all the brainrot and snippets and fic updates and drabble requests if you wanna come chill! Hope you're having a good summer so far my friends, and I'll see you in the next chapter. :-)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!